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DENVER DOLL'S DRIFT; or, The Road Queen's Big Campaign.

BY EDWARD L. WHEELER,

AUTHOR OF "DEADWOOD DICK" NOVELS, "ROSEBUD ROB" NOVELS, "DENVER DOLL" NOVELS, ETC., ETC.



WITH THE DEBRIS WENT HEAVENWARD NO LESS A HUMAN SPECTACLE THAN SUNFLOWER SAM, ASTRIDE HIS SUPERANNUATED MULE.

Denver Doll's Drift;

OR,

The Road Queen's Big Campaign.

A Story of Freshet Flats.

BY E. L. WHEELER,

AUTHOR OF "DEADWOOD DICK" NOVELS, "ROSE-BUD ROB" NOVELS, "DENVER DOLL" NOVELS, ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

ONE WAY TO LOSE A MINE.

"YAS, they say old Nathan Blob is comin' ter town, to-night, bag an' baggage, fetchin' along his swag, wi' which to buy up a monopoly over ther minin' interests, heer in Freshet Flats!"

The speaker was a black-bearded, roughly-dressed man, who formed one of a party of half a dozen persons that were seated in Fisk's grocery store, one rainy September evening, in the young mining-camp of Freshet Flats.

Fisk's grocery was the only store in the camp, and consequently was a place of rendezvous, nightly, for characters that did not frequent the *Satanello*, the chief saloon and gaming den of town.

The speaker was Jim Fisk, the proprietor of the grocery—a man who had followed up mining life, since '49, and who was noted as "suar" from the word go.

Of course occasionally some one would insinuate that Fisk's character was not spotless; but then, a man never existed in a rough Western mining-camp, whom some one had not something to say against, and Jim generally backed up any insults with the free use of a six-shooter, which he knew pretty well how to handle, as did his daughter Fanny.

His audience, to-night, was with one exception, composed of roughly-attired and bearded men, like himself, who were plainly veterans in the mines, and who were not afraid to use the weapons they wore in their belts.

The exception was a well-shaped young man, dressed in citizen's attire, with a display of jewelry, and the air of one who was born to easy circumstances.

His hair was jet-black, and a mustache of the same color ornamented his lip.

Of face, he was dark complexioned, and of sinister expression; a cynical smile almost constantly hovered about his mouth.

The words of Jim Fisk had been addressed to this individual, more particularly.

"I suppose ordinary mortals will stand no show, when the monopoly magnate comes!" this sport said.

"Reckon you're right, unless you can rope him in with a skin game, La Force."

To which the young man showed two gleaming white rows of teeth, in his sardonic smile.

"The boys tell me the ownership of Denver Doll's Drift is likely to change hands!" Fisk went on, inquiringly. "How is it?"

"I judge that's about the size of it," La Force rejoined. "Those who dance must pay the fiddler. Heard how we ran it in to corral?"

"No. I simply heard that Dolly had been taken in, and done for."

"Well, you see, last evening Doll came into the *Satanello*, where I and Ben Blye were playing eucher—that is, we were playing off; Ben losing all the time, and I winning heavily, in anticipation of picking up a snap. This Denver Doll stood looking on, an' when Blye quit, two hundred out, she was gal enough to allow she could beat the man who put the spots on the cards.

"I allowed she couldn't, and first you know we were at it, hundred dollars a side. She was a good player, and had sharp eyes, but I knew several points—El Paso skin game—that she didn't, and as a natural consequence, I won twenty successive games. That made her mad, and she wanted to borrow swag to gamble on. No one responded, so I agreed to lend her a thousand for twenty-four hours, and take a mortgage on the mine. She agreed, and Paque, the lawyer, fixed up a light mortgage, which makes the Drift mine, if Denver Doll don't come to time, at eleven o'clock, to-night."

"And you won the other thousand?"

"Of course. The man or woman does not live, that can beat me at cards!"

And the sport spoke with emphasis enough to denote that he believed what he said.

Denver Doll's Drift was the only quartz mine yet opened, at Freshet Flats, and was already developed into one of the best paying leads in that

section of Arizona. All the other claims at the Flats were moderate paying placer or surface mines, and promised speedily to play out. Nor had diligent prospecting discovered another vein of quartz in the hills about the Flats, that guaranteed to pay for the labor of opening.

Therefore the future prospects of the camp depended mainly upon Denver Doll's Drift, and the noted young queen of Western detectives was considered as being the destined richest person in that part of the territory.

But, now, according to the statement of Jean La Force, her prospects were poor, unless she could raise a thousand dollars before eleven o'clock, that night.

This she could have done, only that her young protegee, Little Bill, had gone East, several weeks before, for machinery, taking all but a couple of thousand dollars of their available funds with him.

It was already time for his return, but there was no knowing exactly what day he would put in an appearance.

Thus was the loss of her available cash liable to put the girl sport in trouble, as there was probably not a man at the Flats, aside from Jean La Force and Ben Blye, who could raise a thousand dollars to meet a sudden emergency, unless it was Jim Fisk—and that personage and the detective queen were not exactly on good terms, for the reason that she had refused to sell him a share in the Drift.

"I'm bettin' the mine is yourn," Fisk remarked. "I opine if the gal is really broke, that she won't find no one hyer who can help her out."

"That's what I concluded, when I lent the money for so short a time," La Force chuckled. "The mine is worth a hundred thousand, if a cent. Pretty good investment, eh?"

"Yas; but I wouldn't like to be in your skin, if you take the mine away from her!" an old gray-haired miner said, who was known as Uncle Job, from the fact that he was noted for his patient disposition.

"Why not?" La Force demanded.

"Beca'se ye don't half know that aire gal, I tell ye. She's a big-hearted 'un, an' suar, as a corner, but she ain't one 'twill be run over."

"Pshaw! Would you for a moment imagine that I could be intimidated by a woman?" scornfully.

"Wull, wait an' see. Ef report don't lie, you wouldn't be the furst galoot she's made knuckle under. Orter go up around Boise City, ef ye want'er get her pedigree."

"Humph! I'll run chances against her chewin' off my ear. Ef you're so much struck on the gal, old man, why don't you put up for her?"

"Wish to Lord I had the ducats, an' I would!" Old Job replied, promptly and heartily. "I'm blowed ef I don't feel like a fightin'-cock, when I hear a feller brag about beatin' a gal out o' her money by a skin game? Ef I hadn't nigh seventy year on my head, I'd like to lick sech a galoot before each meal-time, jest as an appetizer."

La Force flushed angrily, and sprung to his feet.

"Mebbe you'd like to try it on, now!" he cried, savagely. "I've a mind to flatten your nose for you, you old loafer!"

"Be keerful, boyee! Don't ye tech me, ef I am old, or by the Holy Moses, I'll larn ye better!" the miner cried, also rising. "I don't want to pick bones along wi' sech as you, but I'm hanged ef ye'll git advantage on 'count of my years!"

"What! you dare to talk back to me, you old fossil? Why, I'll have to learn you better manners!" the gambler cried, and he strutted up to Old Job to slap him across the mouth; but quick as lightning the old fellow ducked his head, and catching La Force by the leg, jerked him down upon the floor.

He then stood aloof, and calmly awaited for the gambler to arise, which he did instantly, the back of his immaculate white duck coat considerably soiled.

"Curses be on you! I'll have your life for this!" he roared. "I'll show you who is the best man in Freshet Flats!"

He leaped upon the miner with the agility of a panther, and both went to the floor, La Force on top.

The next instant he seized Old Job by the throat, and proceeded to choke him to death, the others crowding around and looking on with approval.

La Force was counted a bad man at the Flats, and had not yet met his equal as a fighter or card sharp.

In all probability he would have been permitted to accomplish his murderous purpose had

not the door of the store opened, at this juncture, and a stranger walked in.

Comprehending the situation, this new-comer uttered a yell, and leaping forward, jerked the gambler off from his victim, throwing him back upon the floor, when he planted one foot upon his breast and leveled a revolver at his head.

"There, you infernal whelp, lay there!" he cried sternly. "What d'ye mean by assaulting a man old enough to be your grandfather?"

"Who the devil are you?" La Force gasped, both enraged and terrified. "Let me up, curse you!"

"Not yet, my fine fellow. When the old gent says you can get up I'll let you up. If he wants me to pin you to the floor, I'll throw my knife through you!"

The speaker was a dashing-looking frontiersman of some five-and-twenty years, with a fine face and figure—the former somewhat tanned by exposure, and the latter attired in a serviceable civilian's suit, with high top-boots upon his feet, a slouch sombrero upon his head, and a belt around the waist, which contained a revolver and knife in addition to the one he held in hand.

His face was strikingly handsome, with pearly teeth, penetrating brown eyes, a tawny mustache, and a head of brown hair that rippled to his shoulders like a veil.

"What shall I do with the tough?" he asked. "Just sing out his doom, and I'll execute it just so sure as my name is Arizona Alf!"

All hands started, and looked surprised!

It was not an unfamiliar title. Down from the north-western part of the territory had now and then come some miner's camp-fire yarn, about the dare-devil pranks of a reckless ranger called Arizona Alf—a man said to fear neither man, beast nor devil, and who was a terror to evil-doers.

"Oh! yes, it's me," he went on—"it's me, you bet! and I reckon some of you have heard of such a galoot. But, I say, pap—what shall I do with this rampant rooster what was a-shet in' off yer throtle?"

"Let him go!" Old Job replied. "I orter know'd better than to try and defend myself. I'm too old ter tackle sich cattle as him!"

"Better just give me permission to put a bead through him, so that he can't hurt you in the future."

"No! I want no murder on my soul," Job answered. "Let him go. He will do better, I hope!"

"You bet I will!" La Force retorted. "I'll finish you, next time!"

"You dare to touch him and I'll make you wish you'd never been born," Arizona Alf cautioned, removing his foot, so that the gambler could arise.

"Curse you, I'm not afraid of you!" La Force cried. "If you want to fight squeal out!"

"I am not the party to take the offensive. If you particularly desire to get mangled, I've no doubt the avenger of Joaquin Mariete can accommodate you!"

La Force grew suddenly white.

"You?" he gasped—

"Am the only surviving relative of ill-fated Joaquin, and have the blood of vengeance in my veins. There are living yet, several of Joaquin's enemies, or their families, and they are mine!"

"Well, if you're that sort of a pilgrim, I opine you've come to the right camp to get lynched!" Jim Fisk declared, seeing that La Force was rather weakening.

"The rope was never made that will lynch me!" Alf retorted, coolly. "Besides that, there is not square inches enough of man, in the camp, to handle me. If you think there is, and have got the stuff to back it, just trot out your man. I am ready at all times to conquer conceit by the most approved methods!"

Here was a bold challenge, and every man in the room knew it, but none of them seemed disposed to take it up.

La Force had by degrees got around to the other side of the stove, and was apparently indisposed so far as tackling the Arizonian was concerned.

"Your challenge is that of a bully, and not worthy of notice!" Fisk said. "Let me tell you, however, that if you propose to remain in this camp, you will have to exhibit less braggadocio, or you'll get planted!"

"If you think so, why don't you trot out one of your planters?" Arizona Alf demanded.

"Fight with nature's weapons, and I'll give a few lessons!" La Force answered.

He had heard enough of Alf to fear to tackle him with knife or pistol.

For himself, he was a trained pugilist. No

man in Freshet Flats had yet been able to tap him on the nose, and there were some fellows among the hardy miners, who had a deal of science in the fistic art.

Arizona Alf looked the challenger over for a moment, critically, and noted two facts. La Force was trimly, compactly, and muscularly built—then, his every natural movement denoted a quickness that is especially desirable to a boxer; but these facts did not in the least disconcert the Arizonian.

"Consider me your pupil, then," he answered, "and let's get at the lessons!"

La Force threw off his coat and vest in an instant, and rolled up his sleeves. Alf leaned against the counter, making no move to disrobe.

A ring was hastily chalked out on the floor, and when the gambler signified his readiness, the two athletes confronted each other.

Resolve gleamed in each eye—it was plainly destined to be a battle of two masters.

CHAPTER II.

THE LONE ROBBER AND A SCIENTIFIC "SET-TO."

"HALT!"

Sharp and stern rung out the challenge, sounding above the noise occasioned by the coach-wheels, as the clumsy vehicle tore along down through a deep mountain gulch, drawn by six good horses.

Not only did Buck Bradley, the driver, hear the challenge, but he saw a person standing in the trail just ahead, with a rifle leveled toward the coach.

"Halt, or I'll fire!" came the command again, and so sternly, that the veteran Jehu jerked his horses back upon their haunches.

The road-agent, who was dressed in good clothes, including top-boots and a plumed slouch hat, and a mask upon the smooth face, advanced, keeping his rifle ready for instant use.

"Get down off from your box!" he ordered, addressing Bradley. "If you don't, you're a dead man!"

Buck had confronted these officious gents of the road more than once during his career, and had learned that it was safest to obey their commands; so he leaped to the ground, and awaited further orders.

"Tell your passengers to pile out!" the bandit next ordered.

Bradley flung open the coach door.

"Dust out, you passengers!" he cried. "That's a feller out beer wi' a sixteen-shot battery as wants to see ye. No monkeyin', now, ner kickin', but pile right out!"

Following this significant hint three men growlingly clambered out of the coach.

One was a short, broad-shouldered man, with a tremendous stomach and a fat face of rather sour, disagreeable appearance.

The next was a "swell" in a checkered suit, fresh kids, soft hat and eye-glass—a milk-complexioned party, with attenuated legs, a hooked nose, and flaxen side-whiskers.

The third and last to leave the stage was a bouncing negro, as black as jet, who evidently belonged to the old gent of the big corporosity.

The trio halted in line as they left the coach, and their strong contrast of appearance provoked a dry laugh from the road-agent, who had now drawn a revolver and slung his rifle to his back.

"Well, this is a healthy-looking haul, I must remark!" he said. "Best you can scare up, driver? Get in a line, there—that's right, now. Nothing like order, you know. Throw up your hands, every mother's son of you!"

"Vot der duyfel you means?" the fat party demanded. "Dis vas von outrage!"

"You bet!" the road-agent averred. "I am Red Star, the road-runner, and I want your money. Hands up, if you don't want to get salivated!"

The command was obeyed.

Nathan Blob, the wealthy Jew, sputtered and cursed furiously, but the negro and the swell were too much frightened to speak; and, as Jehu Bradley had no money, he did not care so much.

Keeping the revolver ready in his left hand, Red Star was not long in effectually disarming all hands and flinging their weapons into the bushes beside the trail.

"Now, then!" he said, holding forth his hat, "just you toss out your money! I don't care for jewelry—just the simple spondulicks. And remember, I'm only borrowing this for a few days, when it will be returned to you, cent for cent!"

"Guess you're runnin' a new racket, then," Buck declared, with a chuckle. "Road-agents don't generally do bizness on that plan."

"All are not alike, sir. Come! pass out, gents!"

"Py tam, dish ish von pig outrage!" old Blob cried. "I haff no monish. I giff you no monish!"

"You lie, you old gold-grabber! You're not the man to travel without money, and don't you forget it. I know who you are, Blobsy—so just you pan out, or I'll put a buzzer in your noddle that'll be worse'n tho' a mule had kicked you!"

Blob showered invectives upon the road-agent fraternity, and swore dire vengeance on them, winding up by dropping a pocket-book into Red Star's hat, and then scrambling back into the coach.

"You can go, too!" Red Star said to the negro. "Who are you, dandy, and what are you going to contribute?"

"My name is Apollo Snap, and I have nothing to give!" the swell faintly articulated. "Please let me off for I have nothing to spare."

"Well, dash me, if you ain't a cool one. Lookee here, baby, you shell out, or I'll blow the muzzle off from you!"

"The what?" Apollo demanded.

"Yer muzzle—you're frontpiece—your mug. None o' your sniveling now, but give me your pocket-book, before I drop you."

Looking more frightened than before, the swell obeyed, and then hastened to seek the protection of the coach.

"Reckon that will do, now!" Red Star said, giving a shrill whistle, which brought a handsome saddle horse to his side. "You can tell the citizens of Freshet Flats that Red Star sends his kindest regards!"

The next instant he was in the saddle and flying down the gulch.

Bradley then mechanically mounted the "hearse," and followed on toward Freshet Flats, highly elated that the first stage-robbery on that trail had been attended by no bloodshed.

At Jim Fisk's grocery, in Freshet Flats, the excitement was intense, and, yet, the silence profound, as the two athletes stood confronting each other.

The following instant, however, the silence was broken by a sudden and resounding whack, which struck the gambler on the forehead, causing him to stagger back.

It was a shoulder blow which the Avenger of Joaquin had struck, and would have lifted any ordinary man off his feet.

"Curse you, I was off my guard, then!" the gambler yelled, coming to time with an effort. "That's not my fault," Alf replied, good-naturedly. "If you don't want to get a sundowner, you'd better be on guard, then."

For a few minutes they indulged in a little sparring, then, as suddenly as a thunder-clap, a blow from the iron fist of the Avenger caught La Force under the nose and sent him spinning backward.

Directly behind him was a large drum woodstove, in which was a hot fire.

The capacious door chanced to be open, and as he staggered and fell backward, the gambler's head plunged into the opening of the fiery furnace.

A cry of horror went up.

The force of his fall knocked over the stove, by which his head escaped from the fiery pit, but not until his hair was in a blaze.

For an instant the spectators seemed stupefied—all except Arizona Alf, who, with almost lightning quickness, pulled off his jacket and wrapped it over the unfortunate's head.

But, though the flames were smothered quickly, the better part of La Force's hair had been singed down to the very scalp.

Howls of pain escaped him, but as there was a prospect that the shanty would catch fire, he was dragged out of doors, where several sympathizers proceeded to dress his wounds.

Arizona Alf, after reviewing the operations for a few minutes, turned and sauntered away.

CHAPTER III.

DENVER DOLL AFLOAT.

At midnight Freshet Flats' principal gaming den, the *Satanello*, usually held its largest crowd, and to-night was no exception to the rule.

The room was overflowing in every part, and various games were going on, while drunken revelry prevailed; but one of the sorriest-looking objects in the room was Jean La Force, who presided behind the bar, with head bandaged in every part except his face, and an expression of ugly ill-humor upon that.

The *Satanello* was jointly owned by him and

a fellow named Blye, who was engaged in attending to the games.

Few of the audience made any audible remarks about La Force's misfortune, for a couple of cocked revolvers lay on the shelf back of the bar, and they knew he was in a capital humor to use them at slight provocation.

Although every person in the room was watching some game or other, or engaged in conversation, it might have been noticed that they often glanced at the clock behind the bar and then toward the door.

When La Force looked at the clock a devilish smile of triumph would pass over his face.

At eleven o'clock Denver Doll was to have redeemed her mortgage.

It was now after twelve, and it was distinctly stated in the agreement that only two hours' grace should be given, under any circumstances.

The crowd in the *Satanello* were to a man acquainted with the facts, and hence their manifest interest.

A quarter of one came. But fifteen minutes did Denver Doll now have, to redeem her mine.

If one o'clock struck, and she had not appeared, it was at La Force's option whether to let her redeem the Drift property or not.

"A thousand dollars to a cent, that Denver Doll's Drift is mine!" he cried, from behind the bar, as five minutes to one came, and the detective queen had not shown herself. "All that wants to take the bet, step up!"

Evidently no one in the room was flush with their stamps.

Four minutes to one!

Peter Paque, the only lawyer in the camp, mounted one end of the bar, holding a legal-looking document in his hand.

He was a pinched, shriveled-up little man, with the sharp features and general appearance of a scamp, and 'twas said of him that he was not at all scrupulous as to how he made money.

"Gents, at one o'clock, I foreclose the mortgage held by Jean La Force, against the Denver Doll mine. The full extent of grace will have expired, with the striking of yonder clock, and I do announce to you all that the mortgage is then lawfully foreclosed. Enough said!"

Two minutes lacking of one o'clock!

The games had stopped!

Every man stood facing the bar, with strange, eager expressions of countenance, their gaze riveted upon the face of the clock, toward which the finger of Jean La Force pointed, like a menace.

Dead silence reigned, only the low tick of the time-piece breaking the silence.

One minute to one!

What an eternity to some—what a loss to others might the striking of the clock signify?

Tick! tick! tick! tick!

It scarcely seemed that a muscle of the human beings in the room, stirred, so absorbed were they—even the expressions of the motley array of faces was changed into a sort of anxious pallor.

Ting!

It was over!

The hour was struck, and according to contract, Denver Doll's Drift belonged to Jean La Force.

Hark!

Every ear turns toward the door—every face expresses eagerness, and some disappointment combined with eagerness—all but one.

That face expresses malicious exultance.

It is the face of Jean La Force.

But why the eagerness?

A furious clatter of horse's hoofs is heard approaching.

The horse dashes up to the door.

Some one leaps off!

The door is burst open!

Denver Doll, the queen of detectives, and handsomest girl sport in the West, enters with a rush.

"I redeem that mortgage!" she cries, with a glance at the clock.

"Young woman, you are just one minute too late!" the voice of Peter Paque replies. "The mortgage is already foreclosed. The Drift belongs to Mr. Jean La Force, and all the courts of law in Christendom cannot take it away from him."

"Do you refuse to accept back the money I borrowed, and return me the paper?" the girl demanded, turning her flashing eyes upon La Force.

"Most assuredly!" he answered, with a mocking smile.

"Then, may the curse of Denver Doll rest upon you and that mine until it is restored to me!" she cried, backing toward the door.

"Stop that girl!" La Force cried; and a dozen of his admirers in an instant took the detective queen into custody, and disarmed her.

She struggled, but it was no use.

Man though she might appear in her jaunty suit of male attire, she was still a weak woman as compared with the hardened miners who seized hold of her.

In the struggle her sombrero fell to the floor, and her beautiful hair was tossed into wild confusion, which, if anything, made her more beautiful than ever, with her cheeks flushed and eyes dancing with indignation.

"Release me!" she cried. "What is the meaning of this assault?"

"Jest be quiet, if you please!" La Force said, with a wicked chuckle. "You raised the money, and got here too late to redeem the mine. Supposin' you jest explain to us law-abidin' citizens how and where you raised the swag!"

"I will explain nothing!" she retorted. "I defy the whole of you! You are a pack of ruffians, and if that mine is not given back to me, this town shall know what a wronged woman can do!"

"I guess no one ain't skeart of you!" La Force growled. "Ef you don't tell where you made a raise of the swag, why we'll hold ye till we find out. Mebbe there has been a stage robbery, or somethin' of the kind, since money ain't picked up so orful easy!"

A close observer might have noticed that Doll winced perceptibly; but none of the crowd probably noted the fact.

It indeed was she who had tapped the stage, that night, and so boldly relieved the passengers of their cash under the name of Red Star. But, how did La Force divine the secret? And why did he order her arrest?

It would not be long ere the stage would arrive; then her identification as Red Star was almost a certainty.

The thought fairly maddened her, and making another sudden and desperate struggle for liberty, she succeeded in breaking away, and a bound carried her through a window, taking the glass and cross-bars of the sash with her.

In an instant, all was the wildest excitement, and the rough men of Freshet Flats poured from the saloon, weapons in hand and yelling vengeance.

Across the gulch, in which the Flats were situated, sped the detective queen like a frightened fox.

The drizzling rain and deep darkness hid her from view, and it was literally useless to follow—yet Jean La Force led the pursuit.

Soon they came to Rapid Creek, a furious mountain torrent that whirled through a deep but narrow channel, on its southward course.

No bridge spanned the stream, and only a very expert leaper could reach the other side; yet beyond the stream, and above its angry roar, they heard Denver Doll's defiant yell.

Had she leaped the stream?

If so, it was something that no man in the party could do, and the detective queen was safe, so far as the immediate present was concerned.

La Force knew this, and growlingly ordered the men back to the saloon, satisfied that it was useless to attempt further pursuit.

But, had he known it, he was deceived, as regards Denver Doll being on the further side of the stream, for she was not. On reaching its edge, and realizing that she could not get across, she ran on down the shore, and after proceeding for a little way, cut back in a circuitous way into the camp.

"They think I leaped the creek, but they'll find out better ere long," she muttered, grimly. "I wonder if they'll visit my shanty?"

Her abode was on the outskirts of the camp, and thither she made her way, taking care not to approach too close, until she was satisfied that La Force and his followers had returned to the *Satanello*.

She then approached the shanty, when to her surprise she perceived that the door was open, and a man was standing on the threshold, smoking a cigar.

CHAPTER IV.

A GIANT SUNFLOWER.

A GLANCE convinced her that he was a stranger, and a handsome one in the bargain; and as there was nothing particularly hostile in his demeanor, she concluded to advance and find out what he was doing there.

He stepped from the doorway as she approached, and tipped his sombrero politely.

"Excuse me, but perhaps I have been trespassing," he said. "I happened along here, and

finding the door open, and no one apparently at home, I concluded I'd better play watch-dog until some one did come."

"Thank you. I must have forgotten to lock the door when I went away," Doll responded, regarding him curiously.

"Will you step inside, until the rain slacks up?"

"If you think proper, yes. Will you favor me with your name first?"

"Denver Doll is what I am generally called, sir."

"Indeed! I have then heard of you frequently, and am glad to meet you. I am Arizona Alf—a name, perhaps, not familiar to you."

"I have also heard of you. You are called the Avenger of Joaquin?"

"Exactly."

They then entered the rude dwelling, and Doll closed the door, seating herself near it.

"You will excuse me for not striking a light," she said, "as I am sought for by a gang of ruffians, and do not want them to know I am here. If they do come, I'll give them a warm reception before they shall capture me."

"Then count on me as your assistant. But how is this? I have heard that you were one of the prominent citizens."

"Possibly prominent, from the fact that I did own part of the quartz mine, but hardly popular—with the rough element."

"You say you did own the mine, or a part of it?"

"Yes. If you like, I will explain."

And she proceeded to narrate, in a straightforward manner, what is already known to the reader.

Arizona Alf listened without speaking until she had finished.

"I am sorry to hear this," he said. "From all accounts I have ever heard of you, you have hitherto borne an unimpeachable record; but I fear, as you say, that you are outlawed, so far as this town is concerned. What do you propose to do, in regard to the mine?"

"Fight for it to the bitter end!" Doll cried resolutely. "If the Drift can't do me any good through one minute's loss of time, it shall never do any one else any good, and you can bet high on it."

"Bravo! I heartily admire your grit. If you ever need a friend, don't forget that the Avenger of Joaquin Muriete has a heart that beats warmly for the weak and downtrodden, and a hand that can grip like steel. I—"

Just then there came a loud knock upon the door—a knock that must have been given by a ponderous fist, for it made the door rattle on its hinges.

Denver Doll looked at Arizona Alf, whom she could just see through the gloom, and motioned silence.

In a moment came the powerful knock again, and following it, a coarse, blatant voice cried out:

"Open up thar, cuss ye, or I'll tumble yer door down! Ye needn't putend thar ain't no one to hum, 'cause I know a darned sight better. Heerd yer squawkers a-goin' a minit ago."

Denver Doll tiptoed over to where Arizona Alf was seated.

"Do you think it's some of La Force's gang?" she asked, in a whisper.

"I don't know. Sounds more like some half-drunken bullwhacker from out of town."

Just then there came a furious kick at the door that made it spring inward.

"Aire ye goin' ter open?" the hoarse voice roared.

Doll drew a revolver and cocked it.

"Better ask who he is, and then you can judge better what to do," Arizona Alf suggested. "He may not be the party you expect."

"Who are you, and what do you want?" she demanded, sternly.

"Ef ye don't open up yer ranch I'll cussed soon show ye!" was the savage response. "I'm Sunflower Sam, right down from Cinnamon Gulch, an' ef ye don't open I'll show ye how to smile. I'm wet ter the skin, an' want shelter till I kin get a bite—then I'm gone."

Not off her guard by any means, Denver Doll unbarred the door and carefully opened it, holding her revolver ready for instant use.

The sight of the applicant for admission satisfied her that he was a stranger.

And a typical Western stranger, to boot.

If giants prevailed in ancient times, this being seemed to prove that the race was not yet extinct.

He was very nearly seven feet in height, and largely proportioned otherwise. His face was massive and rather grotesque in appearance,

with a huge mouth, and large nose with a plain inclination toward the pug. A goatee of about fifty bristly hairs of fiery-red ornamented his chin, while his eyes were little, peering and cunning.

His attire, however, was that of the usual slouchy bullwhacker, consisting of greasy corduroy trousers thrust into a pair of stogy top-boots, an equally greasy and ragged red shirt, open at the throat, and a much-worn plug-hat upon his cranium that had evidently been used as a target for much pistol practice, judging by the number of holes in it.

A belt around his waist contained three horse-pistols, each one of a different pattern, and a large knife.

The moment Doll opened the door he grinned and bowed obsequiously.

"Aha!"

"Thou art one so young an' fair—
By me life, I reck'ed a man lived here!"

he said, with profound reverence.

"Fair lady, behold in me
Sunflower Sam'l on a spree;
I'm bound to have a jamboree,
In honor o' the Wild Fejee!"

And then the giant turned his back, and exhibited a huge cloth imitation of a sunflower, which was sewed to his shirt.

Denver Doll burst into a merry laugh, while Arizona Alf came to the door to see what was the matter.

"Why, Sammy, where's your stockings and knee-breeches?" Doll asked. "You are not complete as an aesthete."

"True. I have been neglectful, fair queen o' the Muses, in not adorning my shins wi' them togs, but then I am so much more aesthetic than brother Oscar, that it is hardly worth mentioning. Can I come in?"

"What do you want?"

"If you have no bear meat or yanked venison, I can, on a pinch, put up wi' a leetle whisk made wi' sunflower tea, miss."

"Better invite him in, rather than make him an enemy!" Arizona said, in a low tone. "If I mistake not, the man is worthy of good handling."

"Well, come in."

"An' my dorg?"

"Of course!"

The aesthete gave a whistle with his enormous mouth, following which a mule of the scrawniest character and size, made its appearance around the end of the shanty.

"That's my dorg!" Sunflower Sam explained, surveying the animal with pride, "an' me an' him allus sails together through this briny vale of tears."

"You don't expect to bring that beast indoors?" Denver Doll exclaimed.

"Bet I do, ef I come in!" Samuel grinned. "Jurisprudence aire jest as much of an aesthete as I am, an' we allus sleep together, dines together, fights together, drinks together, an' communes together. Any one as misuses Jurisprudence misuses me, an' thar's goin' to be trouble when we gits mad."

"Well, come along in; but, mind—there may be a fight heerabouts to-night, and we shall expect you to stand with us."

"Bet I will! Great blizzards an' blisters! Ye just orter see me fight when my dander gits riz."

And with these words the giant entered the shanty, the *burro* following him, and lying down in one corner.

At Arizona Alf's suggestion, Denver Doll now lit a lamp, while the Sunflower became seated.

"Now then, gal, ef ye can trot out a gallon o' bug-juice, with a little yanked venison to wash it down with, et won't take long to nerve me fer fightin' anything from a grizzly to a rhinosereous, an' don't ye forget it. You shall see what Oscar the Second can do in the way o' makin' the fur fly."

"Grub you can have, but nary bug," Doll replied. "I don't keep the stuff around my shanty."

"So? Well, now, then, couldn't ye give me a bottle o' water wi' a bumble-bee or wassup in it—somethin' to get up an irritation when it goes down my muzzle?"

"Guess not, unless perchance you can use a cactus bur."

"Humph! I've used 'em already; but they don't lacerate one's gullet enuff as they go down, like bug-juice does. Brother?"

And he cast a glance at Arizona Alf.

"No. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, didn't know. Looks like as ef he was from good fightin'-stock."

He then relapsed into silence, and proceeded to devour the meat and bread Doll set before him, occasionally tossing a piece to the watch-

ful burro, who would aptly catch it in his mouth.

When he finished eating, Sunflower Sam took his weapons from his belt, examined them carefully, then produced a psalm-book, and began to sing a hymn in a loud voice.

Neither Doll nor Arizona Alf cared to arouse his anger by interrupting him, but both felt positive that his blatant voice would attract attention to the shanty.

And they were not wrong.

The huge, self-styled aesthete had not finished his hymn when the sound of a number of rushing feet was heard approaching.

"To arms! the enemy is coming!" Denver Doll cried, dashing out the light and seizing her revolvers. "Ready when they burst in the door or windows to give 'em all they can hold!"

"All ready!" Arizona announced calmly.

"Hyer too!" Sunflower assented. "Ef they bust the door I'll sick my dorg on 'em, an' he'll kick 'em so high they won't know themselves when they git back."

CHAPTER V.

DENVER DOLL'S BLOW-OUT.

A MOMENT later the mob halted before the shanty, and as a loud kick came against the door, the voice of Jean La Force was heard to cry out:

"Open up! Curse you, open up, or we'll tear the shebang down over your heads!"

No answer was given to the order, and for a minute all was silence, both in and outside.

"Come! Aire ye goin' to open up?" the voice of the gambler again cried. "Ye needn't think we don't know ye're there, fer we do. Be lively, or down goes the door!"

"If you break in here, Jean La Force, you'll find this the liveliest nest of hornets you ever aroused!" Denver Doll warned. "We're armed to the teeth, and we'll make you wade through your own blood before you take us!"

"Oh! will we?" was the savage retort.

Then followed another silence. The gambler and his gang were evidently consulting.

"If that is La Force the gambler," whispered Arizona Alf, to the detective queen, "you'd better not mention that I am here, as it would only strengthen his desire to capture us."

"You know him, then?"

"Rather, he knows me."

"Ah! then it was you who spoiled his beauty?"

"I suppose I was the indirect cause."

Just then some heavy object struck the door—evidently an improvised battering-ram—but the door only shook, and failed to yield.

Denver Doll smiled.

"I'm thinking they'll need reinforcements before they stave in that door," she said. "It was made to be unlocked."

"I'm afraid that persistent applications of a heavy ram would fetch it!" was Arizona's opinion. "It won't do to be off guard."

The shutters that covered the two square windows, were not more vulnerable than the door; consequently, the attack was continued upon the entrance.

Each fresh assault was accompanied by a pandemonium of yells and curses, and each assault made the barrier spring more and more.

"Is there any way of getting out of here, except by the door or windows?" Arizona asked.

"None!" Doll replied, "except—Ha! listen!"

The attack outside had ceased, and the voice of La Force, the gambler, was heard.

"Ef we can't get 'em out any other way, boys, we kin burn the shebang. We'll see ef we're goin' to be pestered with she road-agents!"

Denver Doll laughed, sarcastically, as she heard the words, which caused both Arizona and Sunflower Sam to eye her, in amazement.

"Don't see much to laff about!" Sam remarked, gruffly. "I kin stand sum things, but this bein' roasted ain't what it's cracked up to be."

"Oh! there's nothing like getting used to it," Doll assured. "But, that is not necessary."

As she spoke, she stooped and pulled upon a ring, in the floor, which raised a trap-door.

"Now, then, get down there, as quickly and as quietly as possible," she commanded, "and I will follow you."

Arizona Alf obeyed, but Sunflower Sam demurred.

"I can't take Jurisprudence down thar with me! an' ye can bet I don't budge an inch without him. Go 'lang wi' ye, an' arter ye're gone, Juris an' I wull make our exit by the front way."

"As you like," Doll said, knowing the roughs would not be likely to harm the giant.

She then followed Arizona Alf into the cellar, and closed the trap after her.

In five minutes more flames were licking the sides of the shanty, despite the rain, and its destruction was a certainty, when, suddenly, and evidently before the fire had penetrated to the interior there was a terrific explosion, that literally blew the shanty to atoms; for in truth, the whole structure was blown upward from its foundation, in a hundred different sections, and with the debris went heavenward no less a human spectacle than Sunflower Sam, seated astride his superannuated mule, Jurisprudence!

The mule and its rider, however, were only lifted by the eruption a matter of ten feet above terra-firma, and dropped among the startled spectators, while the various parts of the shanty landed at some distance from its former site.

Neither the aesthete nor his "dorg," were much the worse for the explosion, evidently, for the animal brayed loudly on striking the ground, and Sunflower turned a ludicrously grinning countenance toward the astounded crowd of gaping ruffians.

"Good-evening, feller-citizens!" he saluted: "how'dy do? Didn't expect me to arrive so suddint, I reckon?"

"No, I should remark not!" Jean La Force growled. "What caused that explosion? Who are you? Where's the accursed minx, Denver Doll?"

"One at a time, capt'n—one at a time. The kersplosion war excited by powder, sir—simply powder. Dunno whar it was, nor how she went off. My name is Sunflower Sam, the pocket edition of Oscar, the aesthete. Can't say whar Denver Doll is; s'pose likely she went up in the same blaze o' glory that I did, an' hain't come down yet. Any other questions ye want to ask?"

"Don't ye be so sassy, you over grown lout, or I'll soon show you I'll have no shennannigan. Just you tell me whar the gal is, or I'll bore a hole thru' your skull!"

"I tell ye I hain't no idea whar she is, onless she's up to the moon, blast yer unaesthetic profile!" Sam fired back, "an' what's more, I don't want no more o' yer sass, or I'll step over and punch yer head fer ye. That aire gal sed she was goin' ter hide in the cellar, an' I told her I was a comin' out to save gittin' roasted; but, jest afore I was quite ready, I got a lift that helped me along—eh? Jurisprudence, old boy?"

The animal brayed loudly, as if fully cognizant of what its master was saying, and at the same time quickly reaching out one of its hind hoofs, gave a miner a dig in the stomach that doubled him up like a jack-knife.

A howl of laughter went up from the spectators, as the unfortunate man hobbled away toward the heart of the camp, howling like a loon.

"Tell ye w'at, thar's a power o' music 'bout us aesthetic twins when we git a going!" Sunflower Sam announced. "G'lang, Jurisprudence! We'll try some new lodging-house, and see ef we'll get bounced again."

And the animal struck off into a lively canter toward the heart of the camp.

Jean La Force and his pals, and such of the other citizens as had collected at the spot, soon followed, satisfied that Denver Doll must have certainly perished by the explosion, or in its ruins.

In the meantime the stage had arrived and disgorged its trio of passengers, and the suspicions of La Force were verified by the report of old Nathan Blob, Apollo Snap, and the negro, who bore the pious cognomen of Mose.

The excitement was therefore intense, until La Force returned to announce that Denver Doll had been blown to atoms, which greatly added to the Jew's anger.

"Py dam!" he vociferated, "dot vimmens mit pants on, she sdeals mine monish, und uff she pe-plowed oop, so ish my monish!"

On the following morning Jean La Force, armed with his legal document, and accompanied by a deputy sheriff and a posse of his own, repaired to the Drift office, and demanded the surrender of the mine from Joe Banker, the superintendent.

At first Banker protested, but finally made a surrender, and posted a notice that all men who had been employed there were henceforth discharged.

Most all of these employes were honest workmen, whom Denver Doll and Little Bill had specially selected to serve them, and the blow fell upon them with unwelcome force; but there was no present help for it, as the gambler set his own clique to work, with orders that half

should work the mine by day, and half by night, in order that there should be no chance for any one else to gain possession.

The old Jew, Nathan Blob, sought out Jean La Force, and made him an offer for the mine, but the wily gambler said "nay," and Blob & Co. were consequently disappointed—for it appeared that the swell really was a partner of the Jew.

Blob accordingly employed several men to prospect along the foothills for another good place to sink a drift.

During the day Arizona Alf was again in the camp, and ran across Sunflower Sam, who started back with a cry, as though he had met a ghost.

"Dry up, you fool!" the Avenger of Joaquin Muriete breathed, sternly. "Not a word to any one that I was in that shanty last night!"

"Upon my aesthetic soul, no!" the giant nodded. "But how, in the name o' the seedy sunflowers o' Sorrocco, did ye escape?"

"By an underground tunnel, or passage, which the girl had secretly built. But not a word of this either."

"Depend on me. And the gal—where is she?"

"Safe, in a place where an army could not take her, except at her will. Keep this also a secret. To-morrow you will know more. How did you escape?"

"Holy daisies o' Damascus! thru' the aerial fluid o' heaven, to be sure!" the giant grinned.

"Sublime and beautiful was the picture—like a hen-hawk whizzin' aloft on an autumnal breeze. Ye see, I war jest goin' to leave the place when the explosion gin us a lift—me an' Jurisprudence—an' no gazelle ner toy balloon ever went scootin' inter the atmospheric aetheria more gracefully than did I an' the dorg. An' when we kim down, right side up wi' care, no Oscar evyer created a bigger sensation than us aesthetic twins."

Arizona Alf scarcely smiled, but looked the aesthete over keenly.

"See here!" he said, grimly, "you have got a large amount of lip for a man whose appearance is so rough. What racket are you up to, anyhow?"

The giant grinned.

"I don't understand you," he said. "I am simply an aesthete. No deception whatever—no deception whatever."

"You are *something* in disguise," the Avenger averred. "But mind what I told you—keep mum about the fire."

And with this caution he turned away.

That day and night passed without further incident.

But when another morning dawned Freshet Flats was thrown into consternation, the cause of which was a number of flaring posters, stuck up in eligible places about the camp, which read as follows:

OFFICE OF DENVER DOLL'S AGENTS.

PROCLAMATION.

To All Whom It May Concern:—

This is to certify that I, the undersigned, am not dead, but, on the contrary, as live as a living person could well be, surrounded by a company of brave, self-sacrificing fellows, who are willing to avenge a woman's wrongs—the wrongs that you, the people of Freshet Flats, have inflicted upon me, by declaring me an outlaw and waging war against me as such.

Perhaps some do not know the circumstances of the case. Let me explain:

I gambled with Jean La Force and lost. I borrowed money of him and gambled again—he taking a mortgage on my mine, payable in twenty-four hours, with two hours' grace. I arrived with the money one minute after the time was up, but he refused to give up the mortgage. This was the first outrage.

I was next arrested, charged with obtaining the money by robbery, but I escaped and fled to my shanty, where I was surrounded by an ugly gang of ruffians, headed by the gambler ruffian, La Force. The shanty was fired, and I must have perished, but for a secret I chanced to know. Phenix-like, I arose from my ashes, to have revenge.

About the stage robbery, I did the job, through desperate need of money to redeem the mortgage. I promised the passengers they should receive back cent for cent, what I borrowed, and so they shall, at any hour there shall be an election of the people who will give me back my mine and rights—I paying La Force what I owe him.

This is fair, and no honest person can see it in a different light.

Sensible people of Freshet Flats, I warn you to consider this carefully.

You have your choice.

By your choice shall this matter be settled—whether I shall be your citizen or your scourge—your friend or foe.

I am ready to come back and claim my rights, but if I cannot do so without risk of being strung up

as a road-agent, I hereby set my curse upon all luck to the camp, and swear to make it so red-hot for one and all that you shall be glad to flee from my wrath.

Denver Doll's Drift is mine, or Freshet Flats is doomed.

I appoint the 20th instant for the election, when the major vote shall say if I shall return or not. I will be in camp on that day!

(Signed)

DENVER DOLL,
Chief of the Red Stars.

CHAPTER VI.

A DECIDEDLY ORIGINAL ELECTION.

DENVER DOLL alive, after that fearful explosion!

What would be the next wonder?

As for the young woman road agent's proposition, the opinion seemed about evenly divided. The honest element of the camp readily saw the fairness of the proposal, for the girl had been a favorite among their class, and they regarded La Force's act as despicable, to say the least.

Therefore, several of the most influential miners set about making a quiet canvass, in order that they might determine what the result of an election would be.

On the other hand, La Force had a large number of pals, who were literally bound to stand by him in any emergency, and this fact gave assurance that there would be a very close, if not a bloody contest, before the matter was decided.

Old Nathan Blob was on the side of the "return" party, for he foresaw in such an act a possibility of getting back his money.

Since Jean La Force was proprietor of the Denver Doll Drift, it was generally understood that the spot whereon Denver Doll's shanty had stood also belonged to him.

And so construing, Nathan Blob foresaw that it was an eligible site to build himself a house on, whereupon he met La Force in the street and accosted him.

"Mine frient, dey dells me you owns der place vere der shanty vas plowed up?" he interrogated, folding his arms above his mammoth stomach.

Jean La Force closed one eye reflectively. It had not yet occurred to him, until this, that he might lay claim to the lot.

"Well, what of it?" he demanded.

"Vot you dakes vor id? I vas a poor man, so helb me, und I vas anxious to py von leedle place cheeb, to build me a house on!"

"What do you want of a house?"

"For mine self, for mine frient Snap, und mine peautiful daughter, Christine, vot arrive soon."

"Oh! got a gal, eh? Well, you can have the site for two thousand. Dirt cheap. Fork over, and it's yours!"

"Oh! no! dot ish too t'in, Misder La Force. Der must be some babers made oud, you knows, to make der t'ing safe, so nopody vas can come und take id away from me."

"Well, I reckon not!" a youthful voice cried, and Little Bill Bethel, Denver Doll's boy pard, stepped forward. "Don't you buy a cent's worth o' real estate from this skinflint, the gambler, or you'll get suck-ed in. I own that site."

"You?" La Force roared.

"You?" gasped the Jew.

"You bet! I—inderwidually, I, Billiam Bethel, Esq.!" And the comical-looking boy-man made a wry face, and thrust his thumbs in under his arm-pits.

"You cussed young rat, I've a mind to wring yer neck!" La Force roared. "And if you don't keep yourself quiet 'round this camp, now, you'll get your throat cut," La Force growled, striding away.

"That feller's a reg'lar snappin' snake," Little Bill said to the Jew. "He's mean enough to steal the eyebrows off'm a dead jack. Glad I happened along to save ye from gittin' salivated. Just 'rived in town, an' heerd the rumpus 'bout my pard, Doll. Ever see her?"

"Yes, py tam! and if I ever see dot son-of-a-gun ag'in I plow her prains outside in."

"Oh, you're the old Waterloo she struck in the stage, eh? Ha, ha, ha! Spry gal is Denver Doll. 'Spect she'll marry my dad one o' these days, w'ot's a lord, duke or duches over in England. Don't skeer about yer rocks, tho', Blobsy; they'll be all right, and you'll git 'em when Dolly gits her mine back. So you see it's to your interest to buckle in, and cast ten or eleven votes for her."

"Yesh, I dinks dot ish so—dot is if she giff me pack my monish."

"Don't worry about that. You git in your work, and I'll be responsible!"

"You—dot leedle suibes like you?"

"Bet your head on it! I've got the rocks if I am short, young, sweet an' tender. Ask any galoot if Little Bill ain't got a fat pocket-book and bank account."

"Ish dot so? Vel, I vas glad to hear id. I s'pose you haff some monish to lend?"

"Nary a cent, Blobsy—nary a red! It don't pay. Besides, I want to save up, so when I'm elected President, I can beat old Grant, and pay off the National debt, out o' my own pocket, and take a mortgage on the United States. But, I tell you how you want ter work it fer Doll-baby. There's goin' to be a big vote for La Force, an' we shall have to buckle in our level best to get a majority. See? Well, now, let me pertically button-hole yer, an' remind you to sling out a five or a saw-buck, here an' there, to buy up votes for my pard, an' so win. If ye don't, yer rocks is gone up the flume, shure's there's power in a mule's hoof."

"But, vy do dot? I pays out monish—dotish gone. I get pack odder monish, und sdill I vas oud of pocket."

"Well, go it to suit yourself, but ef ye expect to live long in Freshet Flats, you better vote fer Denver Doll."

And with this bit of advice Little Bill turned importantly away, leaving Nathan Blob in rather an uncertain state of mind as to whether he would ever get his money back or not.

Among the workers in Denver Doll's cause, was the Avenger, Arizona Alf, who was here, there and everywhere, and seeming to have a plenty of money, he was not afraid to spend it where it would do the most good.

A meeting of the partisans of both parties was held at La Force's *Satanello*, and a form of election and votes arranged, and officers and a referee chosen.

Sunflower Sam, and Ben Blye were selected to have charge of the polls, while a miner, newly arrived, named Hawkins, was to act as referee, in case of any disputes.

The rules stated that any person above ten years of age should be permitted to vote.

The polls were to open that night, at midnight, and close at six o'clock in the morning. This was arranged so that there should be little chance, on either side, to smuggle in extra ballots.

During the afternoon and evening, the excitement waxed hot.

The canvass had been prosecuted so thoroughly, that it was known nearly to a man how the vote was going, and it looked as if there were close chances of being a tie.

As the evening passed away, the excitement increased. The one street was in a glare of light caused by numerous bonfires, and a motley mass of human beings surged to and fro, uttering discordant shouts, many of the crowd, of course, being intoxicated.

In front of the *Satanello* was a dry-goods box, upon which Jean La Force stood, with a handful of money in his grasp, while he gesticulated wildly, and made loud but careful offers for votes in his behalf.

Just across the street was another similar stand, close to a camp fire, and this was occupied by Arizona Alf and Little Bill, who took turns at offering money for votes—for as La Force had set the ball a-rolling, it was no more than fair that they should "invest" as well as he.

"Ten dollars—ten dollars for the man who will vote for Denver Doll!" the Arizonian cried, in stentorian tones. "Where's the man—Ah! here he comes; ten dollars, old gent, when you cast your vote for right and honesty."

The man was Nathan Blob.

"That man votes for me!" La Force roared from across the street.

"You lie! He's goin' to vote for the gal who will give him his money back!" Arizona yelled back.

"Bah! Come over here and I'll pummel your nose off."

"Ha! ha! Better let one lesson be enough, old boy."

"You're a coward and a sneak!" La Force shouted, throwing down his pistols and leaping to the ground. "You dassen't fight."

Not a word responded the Avenger of Joaquin, but throwing his weapons to the ground he also leaped from his box, and advanced toward the gambler, in whose face and eyes the rancor in his breast was vividly expressed.

"Bully fer Arizona!" screeched Little Bill, flopping his arms to his side and crowing like a rooster. "He's the stuff, is that pilgrim, an' I'll bet a dollar to a half that he polishes off the card-cuckoo like a chunk o' stove-polish. Sail in, Arizona, an' ef I see ary galoot attempt any

shindy tricks I'll plug him in his equator, you bet!"

Neither of the antagonists paid any attention to the youngster, but advanced deliberately, each watching the other like a hawk.

It was manifestly the intention of the gambler to clinch with the Avenger; but that individual comprehended the purpose, and just as La Force made a leopard-like spring, Alf's iron-like fist caught him in under the chin, and landed him neatly on his back.

A portion of the crowd cheered, and Little Bill crowed again.

"Yip! yip! hooray! That's the kind of a rooster we keep in our flock! That's how Denver Doll's men strike. Reg'lar old burro bit, that was! Bet a dollar to a cent his nibs hasn't got a sound molar in his bread-trap!"

With an effort La Force arose, and staggered to his box.

"That's enough!" he gasped, spitting out blood by the mouthful.

"Sure it will answer for the present?" Arizona demanded.

"I said enough!" was the tart answer.

"Oh! don't disturb him!" yelled Little Bill. "Don't ye see he's no hog? He knows when he's stuck!"

The Avenger laughed quietly, and went back to his business on the box.

An hour passed, and it was near to midnight.

Noticeably, now, there were many rough and grizzled strangers in the street, the majority of whom looked like miners.

Arizona discerned this, and mentioned it to Bill.

The boy looked anxious.

"Looks like a clean beat!" he muttered. "See how La Force is occasionally shuttin' off a triumphant grin. Jeminy, I wish—"

He failed to mention what, however.

A stand had been erected down the street, and was occupied by the three officers, Sunflower Sam, Ben Blye, and Hawkins, the referee.

All voters were to form in line, in single file, the foremost near the polls, and the last at the end up the street.

As they passed the stand, Arizona Alf and La Force were to patrol either side of the line with repeating rifles, to make sure that no man got back to the rear to vote again, and the order was "Death," to whosoever should attempt it.

By a quarter of twelve, the heterogeneous gang was formed in line, the rear end extending some distance up the street; and in this line was every man, woman and boy of over ten years, except those on duty, and every one was armed with a slip of paper containing the name of his or her choice—"Denver Doll," or "Jean La Force."

At sharp twelve the referee fired off a pistol which was the signal to march, and the line began to slowly move forward.

But, though it moved slowly, there was a perfect pandemonium of sounds, principal among which were the asserations of various boozy miners, as for whom they were going to cast their votes, interlarded with characteristic oaths.

Above the din could be heard the screeching voice of Little Bill.

"Jog along thar, ye skunks, and cast yer votes for Denver Doll, the best and squarest gal that ever buckled on a garter, by gum! Cheer, pards, an' remember you're solid fer a job when Doll gits control ag'in, fer we're goin' ter b'ild a crusher, an' raise thunder in general," to which announcement seemingly little or no attention was paid.

One by one the crowd cast their votes, and there was even greater excitement beyond the polls, than before them—the excitement born of desire to know what the result would be.

Probably some of the gang would have attempted to make a break for the rear of the line but for the vigilance of Arizona Alf and La Force—for be it said to the credit of the latter, he seemed determined that everything should go off on the square, evidently well satisfied that he would win the day.

As soon as the last one in the line had passed, the officers and referee cast their votes and the poll was closed.

The crowd quickly surrounded the stand again, when the counting of the votes began, Referee Hawkins standing over the two officers with drawn revolvers, to see that it was done fairly.

Bets were made on every hand, on each candidate, and thousands of dollars promised to change hands on the result.

At last the last vote was counted, and the two men said something low to Hawkins, who advanced to the front of the platform.

In an instant a dead silence reigned—a myriad of gleaming eyes watched the man eagerly.

"Gentlemen," he said, "the votes, by fair count, entitle Denver Doll to remain an outlaw, and Jean La Force to keep the mine. Ten votes did the business."

"Ach, mine Got! Den I vas oud yoost anudder thousand dollars. I vill neffer vote for dot vimmens again," shrieked Nathan Blob, above the din of cheers that followed.

CHAPTER VII.

DOLL MEANS BUSINESS.

WE pass over two weeks in the history of the Flats.

The result of the election was not entirely unexpected to Arizona and Little Bill, but it fell with almost withering force upon the miners who had in a measure regained their hopes of being restored to work in the Drift.

Little Bill was around among them, however, like a sunbeam of encouragement, and his invariable expression, was—

"Cheer up, fellers; the end is not yet. I've a few dollars in the Drift, an' outside too, an' ye knows I an' Doll allers war squar' with ye. Ye kin eat my ears off ef thar ain't a change, afore long!"

Many of the men thanked the lad heartily, for they had a strong attachment for him, but some were morose and gloomy, and seemed inclined to rebel.

The La Force gang were naturally in their element, and glorying in the fact that they had won the election, they likewise appeared to consider that they had won the town, and proceeded to boss it, literally, according to their own liking.

Jean La Force was pronounced mayor, with power to act in all cases—which very naturally made him more officious and insolent than ever.

The La Force gang worked day and night in the Drift, and the deeper and larger grew the excavation, the more gold was discovered, and the more men were required to mine it, so that before the end of two weeks, all of Denver Doll's former employes were working for the gambler prince, as he now might well have been called.

In some respects, La Force was a keen diplomat, and he foresaw strength by joining the disappointed element to his own party, at good wages—for, reasoned he, there was no telling when or in what shape, he might hear from the road-agent queen.

He had caused a large reward to be offered for her capture, and notices to this effect were posted at every approach to the town.

Arizona Alf still lounged about the camp, having stuck up a shanty for his own convenience; and he devoted the most of his time in sauntering about the streets, varying the monotony with an occasional game of cards, by which he seldom lost anything.

Little Bill dodged about, here and there, keeping an eye out, but saying little.

He knew that he was watched secretly, by La Force's orders, and that the gambler only wanted some reasonable excuse to lock him up, and thus put him out of the way of doing any mischief.

Nathan Blob had purchased the site of Denver Doll's ill-fated abode, and erected thereon a large, and, for a mining-camp, comfortable dwelling.

His daughter, Christie, had arrived, and strange to say, did not betray any signs of being a Jewess, beyond the fact that she possessed a brunette complexion, and liquid black eyes.

She was very handsome, both in face and figure, and dressed richly, as well she might, considering her parent's reputed wealth.

She and the snob, Apollo Snap, were seen out for a gallop, every pleasant morning, and it became quite apparent that the Englishman—for such he was—was courting her, and that, too, with the paternal Blob's hearty approval.

Miss Christine, however, was the least bit of a coquette, and she had been but a few days in the camp, ere she saw the handsome face and figure of Arizona Alf, and through another acquaintance managed to get an introduction to him.

After that, it might have been noticed that the intimacy grew.

The Avenger managed to get out for his morning walk, about the time Miss Christine and her escort took their gallop, and it was al-

most a certainty for them to meet, and exchange greetings.

This seemed to highly displease the Englishman, and, one morning, he made it his business to encounter the sport upon the street.

"Aw! I say—see heah!" pausing and glaring at his imaginary rival; "you are the fellah that presumes to make advances to Miss Blob?"

"Reckon I'm the mutton!" Alf laughed, folding his arms, and eying the "blood" sarcastically. "Why?"

"Well, my deah fellow, I demand an apology from you, and a promise that you will heah after cease your attentions in that direction."

"An a-what-ogy?" the sport asked.

"An apology, sir—an apology!"

"Ha! ha! ha! What gall! What d'ye mean, you pup? I apologize to a snob of your complexion! Why, you better go set yourself up for a clothing store man'kin."

"Sir-r-r! If you do not apologize, I shall publicly chastise you with this!" Snap declared, producing a small harmless riding-whip, from under his coat.

At sight of it Joaquin's Avenger laughed heartily, as did several bystanders who had come up.

"Why, that wouldn't kill a flea!" Alf observed.

"But it will leave the sting of an insult!" was the reply.

"Oh! it will? Well, strike out. I'll dare you to!"

The suitor of the handsome Jewess was evidently dead in earnest, for he raised the whip and struck the Arizonian a cut upon the neck that left its red mark; but, had he counted the cost beforehand, he probably would have held his anger in check.

A few feet away was a road-side "swale" filled with greenish water, and tenanted by frogs.

Scarcely had the blow fallen, when the stalwart Arizonian, seizing the swell, raised him above his head, as though he had been an infant, and hurled him forward, head-foremost, into the nasty ditch.

A cheer went up from the spectators, which increased into a howl of derision, as Snap scrambled out of his bath, a most disgusting and pitiable object.

He paused for an instant and shook his fist at his foe, and then trotted away toward the Blob residence, like some whipped school-boy, followed by hisses and cat-calls from the bystanders; which was all that was seen of Apollo Snap that day, and the ridiculous incident became the town's talk.

Nothing had been heard from Denver Doll since the proclamation.

This silence was not reassuring to the people of Freshet Flats. The ruffian element went armed to the teeth, and even Jean La Force appeared nervous and watchful, and to have less confidence in himself than usual.

When or how the blow was to come was a mystery that worked the community into a state of feverish expectancy. Every man became watchful and anxious.

Little Bill, though watched narrowly, showed no signs of having any knowledge of the whereabouts of Denver Doll, nor of her forthcoming moves.

Probably there were only two persons in the camp who knew that Arizona Alf was acquainted with the whereabouts of the road-agent queen, and these were Bill and the æsthetic giant, Sunflower Sam, who had started a little three-card monte table on a vacant lot, and was living off his profits, which were not small.

He was something of an unreadable mystery, this same giant, and was so regarded by every one—the general opinion being that he was not what he appeared.

One dark evening the stage came whirling down into the town during a violent thunderstorm, and unloaded a dozen passengers in front of the new shanty hotel which a party of speculators had hastily erected and opened as a place of refuge for travelers.

Hardly had the stage halted when Budd Harris, the new driver, arose on his seat and yelled:

"Road-agents! road-agents! Denver Doll and her gang halted us a mile back, an' cleaned us out o' about two thousand dollars. Hyar's a letter to the mayor, Jean La Force!"

The letter was promptly taken to the gambler at the *Satanello*, and he was requested to read it for the benefit of the crowd.

Accordingly he mounted the bar and read, in a loud voice, the appended epistle:

"OFFICE OF DENVER DOLL.

"JEAN LA FORCE!—

"SIR:—According to my promise, after being de-

feated in my attempt to obtain my rights through a vote of the people, I will to-night begin my campaign by stopping the incoming stage, and helping myself to such valuables as might conduce to enrich the camp of Freshet Flats. From each person who pans out will be required his name and future address, and this will be attached to his valuables, subject to safe-keeping and restoration—in case I am given back my mine. When the goods are restored there will be a pawnbroker's rate of five per cent. interest on value of each package per month, which I exact as compensation for my trouble and losses.

"By a vote of my band, we shall persist in this course against you and your people, and if you make an attack upon us, we are amply prepared for that. We shall not only relieve the stages, but the camp itself, and all moneys taken that are profits of Denver Doll's Drift will never be restored.

"There is but one way to break us up—drive Jean La Force and his ruffian gang from the town, and give me back my mine, and the war is ended. Otherwise, *never!*—and, too, what we get we keep, if war it is to be.

"Yours from the word go,

"DENVER DOLL!"

Here was a stunner, and an invitation for the well-meaning men of Freshet Flats to take the matter into their own hands, and revolutionize matters so that the detective queen should have her own again.

But it bid fair to be some time ere such a move would be made, unless started by the newcomers; for the old citizens had no cause as yet to complain of any loss.

These new-comers too, if relieved by the road-agents, as a rule would hardly feel like espousing Denver Doll's cause;—they would be more apt to be ready for revenge.

So Jean La Force considered his star considerably in the ascendant.

The letter created a sensation, of course, and on being questioned the robbed passengers all corroborated what the girl had stated.

Their names and addresses had been taken, and written in a book by a masked man, who was evidently the lieutenant of Denver Doll.

Of the band that had surrounded the stage, there were fully fifty, all masked, dressed in picturesque red corduroy, with slouch hats and buckskin leggings, while each man was armed with a Winchester rifle, and revolvers.

Some influential speculators were on the coach, and on arriving at the Flats, they clubbed together and made up a purse of five hundred dollars, which they offered for her capture.

This, with La Force's offer, made a thousand dollars on Denver Doll's head.

Her letter was posted up in a conspicuous place, in the *Satanello*, and left for public inspection.

The following morning, Little Bill met Arizona Alf.

"Didn't I tell you she was a boss?" he said, triumphantly. "It will be a blizzardous day when Doll-baby gits left. Reg'lar ole pawnshop she's runnin'. Like to see her. D'ye think she'll ever get the Drift back?"

Arizona shook his head doubtfully.

"Don't know," he answered. "La Force is getting his feet planted firmer and firmer every day. It will take big odds to root him out, or I lose my guess. The girl is plucky, though!"

That night the *Satanello* was more than unusually full, and the same might have been said of some of its *habitués*. Gambling in every form was at its height, and the scene was at once exciting and hilarious.

During the evening a striking looking personage entered the saloon, who gradually attracted attention. Of medium, well rounded stature, and graceful carriage, he possessed a clean-shaven but dusky countenance, excepting a heavy mustache, and his hair, long and straight, hung well down his shoulders. Over his eyes he wore a pair of impenetrable green goggles.

His attire was a rich and costly suit, such as is usually worn by a Mexican nabob, the trimmings alone being of immense value. A stiff sombrero was worn upon his head, and a sash of satin about his waist. Upon the fingers of each hand were four magnificent diamond rings.

This striking man paused first at La Force's table, and looked on a few moments, and then sauntered on.

"Did you ever see that fellow—do you know him?" La Force asked, addressing a bystander, who from his rough appearance and long white beard, looked like a '49er.

"Oh yes," the man answered. "That is Senor Cobra, the famous Spanish-Mexican poker-player. Rich as Croesus, and never met his equal at poker!"

"Humph! I wouldn't mind taking the conceit out of him if *that's* the case. I'm some on poker, myself. Just mention to him that the

champion would like to make it interesting for him!"

At which the old man chuckled, softly, as he sauntered off to convey the challenge.

Senor Cobra soon came back.

"You sent for me, senor?" he interrogated.

"I did!" La Force responded, sharply. "I understand you are great on poker. I am the man who knows no equal in these parts. Would you like to tackle me?"

Cobra gave vent to a funny laugh.

"I might!" he said. "What amount?"

"Oh! a hundred dollars a side!"

"I never sit down, senor, for less than a thousand," Cobra smiled.

"Oh! well. All the same; a thousand it shall be. Be seated, and put up!"

CHAPTER VIII.

SENIOR COBRA'S CLEVER RUSE, AND SNAP'S SECOND MISFORTUNE.

THE invitation tendered the man from Mexico was promptly accepted, and he took from a roll of American money a thousand-dollar note, and laid it upon the table, with a cocked revolver beside it.

He "meant business," evidently, and Jean La Force knew he had not picked up a flat.

This Senor Cobra had a notoriety. It was said of him that so lucky was he in Mexico, and so many of the Mexican nabobs had he cleaned out, that it had become necessary for him to disappear over the borders, and that until recently his operations had been confined to that Monaco of America, Del Norte.

Noted for abundant riches, and equally for charity, he was a personage to inspire awe in any rough assemblage, inasmuch as he was known to have killed more than his allotted one man.

From a drawer at his end of the table, Jean La Force counted out a thousand dollars, in gold coin, and stacked it alongside Cobra's wager. Then the game began, the table surrounded by many interested spectators, among whom was Little Bill Bethel, his sharp, weasel-like countenance aglow with excitement.

"At it ag'in, are ye, buddy?" he said, addressing La Force. "Jest like yer gall to buck yer brains out ag'in an 'arthquake. Bet a her-ring ye don't know the sort o' stuff ye'r' playin' with. Besides, ye never hev luck when I'm around. I'm a reg'lar Joner. Take keer, don't feel fer the pop. I've got one, too, an' a self-cocker in the bargain."

"Well, you shut up, or I'll fix you!" was the savage retort of La Force.

The game was played, and won by Senor Cobra, who raked in the stakes with a faint smile.

"Another thousand, senor?" he asked, quietly.

"Not by a devilish sight," La Force growled.

"The stake is too heavy. If you'll play for five dollars a game I'll try you."

"Since I was so lucky as to win, I suppose I am in duty bound to accommodate," Cobra responded, pleasantly. "Proceed."

They then played for a couple of hours, Cobra losing steadily.

The interest had abated, in consequence of the smallness of the stakes, and the room was cleared of all but half a dozen professional gamblers who rented tables, and a score of rough-bearded pilgrims of the pick and shovel, who had made their appearance in the camp that evening.

It was after midnight when Senor Cobra threw up his hand, and arose and picked up his pistol.

"I am tired of cards," he said. "Let's try a different game. Jean La Force, you are my prisoner!" And as he spoke he suddenly leveled his cocked weapon at the gambler.

La Force glared around him, only to perceive that the other gamblers and the bar-tender were covered by the weapons of the rough-looking miners.

"Trapped!" he gasped.

"Exactly!" was the mocking answer; "and if you attempt to give an alarm I'll shoot you through the heart. George, lock the doors."

One of the men obeyed.

"Now, then," Cobra continued, "bind together the wrists of each prisoner."

This order was also obeyed, La Force being first served. He was fairly livid with rage, but under that venomous glance of the man of cards, dared not give an alarm.

As soon as the binding process was completed the man George stood guard over La Force, while Cobra proceeded to "go through" the pockets of the prisoners and their money-drawers.

The result of this search was put in a leathern sack; then Cobra approached La Force again.

"What wealth I have secured here rightfully belongs to me, for it came from the Denver Doll mine," he said. "You'll probably be willing to acknowledge that you are euchered, La Force. Do you know me?"

And off came the goggles and fierce false mustache, and the face of Denver Doll was revealed, looking prettier than ever, it appeared, with the dusky dye upon it.

"The devil!" La Force gasped, for he was too surprised to say more.

"You will find me equal to one, if you don't give me back the mine!" was the stern reply. "I mean business, and this is but the beginning."

At a signal her band made their exit through a rear door, and giving La Force a stinging slap in the face she followed.

Before the gamblers could make their cries for help heard the road-agents were far away.

Mr. Apollo Snap, after his unceremonious bath in the pollywog puddle, sought the Blob residence and managed to get to his room without being seen, where in due time, and with the aid of soap, water and another outfit, he succeeded in making himself look as good as new.

He then straightforward hied himself to the presence of the paternal Blob, and to him unfolded a most pitiful tale of his mishaps, including the revelation of Miss Christie's open flirtation with the stalwart Arizonian.

"I vil see apoud dot," Blob blustered, angrily.

"Christie! Christie!"

Christie, in response to the call, came in from an adjoining room.

"Christie, vot ish dot vot Mr. Snap vas dells me spoud you makin' flirdations mit anodder fellow, girl?" the old man demanded, adjusting his spectacles. "Dot veller he drows Mr. Snap in von ditch, und spiles his clothings!"

"Oh! you mean Mr. Arizona? Why, he's my new mash, papa!" the pretty Jewess confessed, her eyes twinkling. "Did he really baptize Mr. Snap? How comical!"

"Comical? Your mash? Py tam! I mash you uf I hear some more such nonsense like dot. Don'd you know you vas der betrothed wife of my friend, Mr. Snap?"

"Well, I should smile not! Who told you?"

"I und Mr. Snap dells ourselves. You ish to marry him, und keep der monish in der family. See?"

"I marry that jumping-jack? Why, papa, I wouldn't give the snap of my finger for such a spitz-poodle as he is! If I can't have Arizona, I won't have no one—that's all. There now!" and the imperious beauty flounced out of the room in high dudgeon, slamming the door behind her.

Snap looked dubious.

Blob looked ditto.

"My case is quashed!" the former said hopelessly.

"Not py a long shot!" Blob decided. "I dells you vot you do. You shall der veller to fight mit a duel, und you use a sword I gif you. All you haff to do is to prick him mit der end of it, und he vas a goner. It vas coated mit deadly poison."

"Aw, excellent! I understand the foils as every English gentleman does. It is, you know, a part of our education; so, I will challenge the beastly American at once. But, supposing I can't git a chance to prick him? He might give me a death-wound."

"Nonsense! These Western shackasses only vas know how to fight mit a pistol. You lick him so easy as rollin' off a log, uf you is quick mit a sword."

Reassured, Apollo went to his room, and penned an insulting challenge, which he sent to Arizona Alf. It was to meet the challenger in a duel with swords in front of the *Satanello* the following morning.

In a short time the answer came back, and was an acceptance.

The following morning was one of sensations. The news of the bold raid upon the *Satanello* was in every mouth, and was an absorbing topic for every one; but this was in a measure forgotten when at sunrise the news got abroad that a duel was to take place in front of the *Satanello*.

A crowd immediately collected, and expectation ran high, for the names of the contestants had not leaked out.

Shortly after sunrise, Apollo Snap made his appearance, carrying a pair of swords, which he placed in the ring that had been formed.

He was flashily dressed, and was accompanied by big Nathan Blob, who evidently proposed to act as master of ceremonies, for he ordered the

crowd to clear away to the sides of the street.

Shortly afterward Arizona Alf came sauntering leisurely up, the picture of healthy indifference, as he puffed away at a cigar.

"Well, are you ready for the funeral?" he asked, rolling up the sleeves of his jacket. "If so, let's proceed, for I've not had my breakfast yet."

A ripple of laughter came from the crowd. The handsome sport evidently did not have much anticipation of a trip to the next world—at least, not until after meal hours.

"I am ready!" Snap responded. "I could get but two swords, and one is rusty and hardly fit for use. We will toss up for the choice. Here is a copper; which will you take, heads up, or tails up?"

"Heads!" Arizona cried. "Toss 'im up!"

The coin spun upward and dropped to the ground—tails up.

"I will give the advantage to you, by taking the rusty blade," Snap announced, seizing it, rather eagerly.

"I presume you would rather have it!" Arizona averred, so sarcastically that both Snap and Blob looked somewhat surprised.

On examining his weapon, Arizona saw to his satisfaction that its edge was as keen as could be wished.

The next instant the two confronted each other.

As he expected, the Avenger found that his antagonist understood the swordsman's art; nevertheless, he was but a child before the Arizonian, who drove him back, step by step, forcing him to take the defensive, and giving him no chance to get in a blow.

It was an exciting moment, and every one watched eagerly and breathlessly.

But it was a contest that was destined to be brought to a sudden close, and a disastrous one for Snap, for, by an expert movement, Arizona tore the sword from his opponent's grasp, and sent it flying across the street!

With a howl of actual terror, Apollo turned and ran like a deer!

For mere sport Arizona followed, and chased the Englishman half-way to the Blob residence, greeted by cheers from the crowd.

Poor Snap managed to reach the doorstep, and there, from sheer fright, fell in a faint, while Arizona sauntered leisurely back toward the hotel.

CHAPTER IX.

AN UNEXPECTED APPEARANCE.

THAT afternoon as the sun was declining, wandering through a desolate Rocky Mountain gulch, some miles from Freshet Flats, was an old man, who seemed to be tottering on the edge of the grave.

He must have been full seventy years of age, for his hair and sweeping beard were as white as snow, and, as he hobbled along with the aid of a staff, he trembled in every joint.

He had evidently journeyed long and far, for his garments were mere tatters, and his shoes worn in holes. Hat he had none.

Every now and then he would pause, wearily, to gaze at the sun, and his desolate surroundings; then he would trudge faithfully on again.

Finally, however, he stopped, with a start. A sweet, musical voice came to his ears from just ahead!

He could distinguish no words, but the voice, in itself, seemed to impress him strangely.

With renewed courage he hobbled on, and presently came to where a beautiful young girl was seated upon a bowlder, engaged in weaving a wreath of wild flowers. She was clad in male attire, and, needless to say, this girl was Denver Doll.

She did not know of human approach, evidently, until she heard a glad cry, and saw the old man standing near her.

Then she, too, gave a start, and her face suddenly became stern in expression.

"My child! my child!" the old man cried, tottering forward, with outstretched hands.

"Stop! I am not your child," she protested, a pained expression upon her face. "You have no longer a claim upon me, inhuman father!"

"Don't! don't!" he gasped. "Will you not welcome me, after I have patiently searched for you so long?"

"Welcome you back?" she cried. "You, the murderer of my—"

"Stop! stop! As Heaven is my judge, I am not guilty!"

"Not guilty—you tell me this? Did you not, when I was a happy girl, in a happy home, oppose my marriage to Walter Walraven, because his father and you had been enemies?"

Did you not threaten me—did you not, at the bridal altar have my husband shot down dead by some unknown assassin?"

"No! no! God bear me witness, no!"

"Stop! do not perjure yourself further. I was satisfied of your guilt—am now—and swore to leave my home forever, and never to recognize you as a father of mine, until I have ample proof of your innocence!"

"I can prove my innocence—only kiss your broken-hearted father, my child, and say that you will give me time to prove how unjust you are."

"You have the remainder of your life to exonerate yourself in. When you prove yourself guiltless, I will receive you with open arms. Until then, go your way."

It evidently required a great amount of will power to speak as resolutely as she did, but there was no expression upon her face to show that anything would cause her to relent.

The old man bowed his head in silent grief for a few minutes; then he looked up, and said:

"You are cruel, but perhaps just to yourself. Will you tell me if I am on the right way to Freshet Flats?"

"You are. Why are you going there?"

"It matters not. I have business there. Good-by, my child!" and with a sob he hobbled on.

Denver Doll arose, and gazed after him until he was out of sight, as if tempted to call him back; then her oath came vividly to mind—the scene where she knelt at the altar beside her youthful husband, and she shrunk back.

"No! I must not be weak. I never dreamed of seeing him again, and somehow his faithful search for me impresses me more than I can express. Why goes he to Freshet Flats? Does he expect to prove his innocence there? He is my father, and there are many pitfalls in Freshet Flats. I can but feel a daughter's interest in his welfare, and will keep a watch that he is not harmed. Perhaps he may be innocent after all! Who can say?"

And tears actually filled the flashing eyes.

CHAPTER X.

A FLIGHT, A MURDER, AND AN ADVENT.

THAT day passed, without any further incident, worthy of special mention, and night once more fell over the rude little mining-camp of Freshet Flats.

Early in the evening, as he sat in the office of the shanty hotel, a boy entered, and handed Arizona a letter, and hastily departed.

An eager flush mounted the Avenger's cheeks, and he tore open the envelope, after giving a hasty glance at the chirography upon it.

The letter was in a woman's graceful hand, and ran as follows:

"DEAR MR. ARIZONA:—

"Your affectionate note just received, and read with feelings of grateful pleasure—that, too, when I find myself in dire trouble, which I will explain, when we meet. In answer to your declaration of affection for me, I have only to say that my admiration for you surpasses that I have ever cherished for any other man. I positively despise the man, Snap; but, if you will meet me, as soon as you get this, at the big cottonwood tree on the bank of the creek, I can tell you much more, and something important, too.

Yours, faithfully,

"CHRISTIE."

Arizona put the letter in his pocket, his eyes sparkling with satisfaction.

"She is my ideal of womanhood," he mused. "Why shouldn't I keep up this intimacy and marry her?"

He left the hotel, and strode with elastic step across the Flats to the great tree, that stood upon the shore of the roaring creek.

Christie was there, seated upon a boulder, under the dark shadows of the overhanging branches, and gave a glad cry, as he approached.

"I am so glad you came!" she said, impetuously. "Do you see that?" and she pointed to a neatly-wrapped bundle, lying upon the ground.

"Yes. What is it?"

"The best of my worldly effects done up, ready for a journey!"

"A journey?"

"Yes. I am going to leave home."

"What for?"

"Necessity compels me. I overheard a plot between my father and Snap, to lock me up in a room, and keep me on bread and water, until I consented to marry the latter."

"The devil!"

"Yes, and I just packed up a few things and here I am. I will not marry Snap. I'll fly to the further end of the earth, first. After receiving your kind letter, I felt that perhaps you could protect me, until—until—"

"Our marriage?"

"Yes, love," and she threw her arms around his neck and hugged him.

"Well, I should be a brute, if I wouldn't!" Arizona exclaimed. "Let me think a moment. They will be likely to discover your flight."

"Yes."

"Well, I have a plan. You have heard of Denver Doll?"

"Oh! yes."

"Well, she is a warm friend of mine, and I know where her stronghold is. I will take you there, and you will have a pleasant home and companion until I get ready to leave this place. Remain quietly here until I return. Do not be alarmed if I should be detained an hour."

"All right. But hurry, please."

He kissed her then, and strode away.

He was not more than out of hearing, when a man stepped from behind the tree, and confronted Christie.

"Sh! don't be alarmed!" he said. "I heard you was going to Denver Doll's retreat, and wanted to tell you something. After you get there, if you can come back and guide me there, I'll give you two thousand dollars. I am Jean La Force. Sh! now mind, mum's the word. I do not urge you to do it—you may desire to do it for revenge. Then, the cash is yours. Keep your own counsel, and remember!"

The next instant he was gone, leaving the Jewess in a state of wonderment.

"I will keep my own counsel!" she mused. Arizona may not turn out what he seems; then I can take advantage of Jean La Force's offer. This Denver Doll may be a flame of Arizona's—he spoke of her as a very warm friend of his. In that case—well!"

She did not finish, but a compression of the lips showed that the venom of jealousy had already gained root in her heart.

Arizona soon came back, leading two horses.

"We're all right!" he signified. "Mount now, and let's be off."

A few hours after Arizona and his bride prospective were leaving the camp, Nathan Blob was sitting alone in his office, which was built adjoining his residence, when the door opened, and the æsthetic giant, Sunflower Sam, entered.

"Howdy do, Nathan?" he saluted, familiarly, closing the door, and helping himself to a chair.

"Nice weather we're havin'."

"Ish dot so?" the old Jew grunted, with a stony stare. "I vas not aware off dot fact ontil you dells me."

"Eh? ye wasn't? Darn me, what kind of a man aire you?"

"A shendlemans, sir!"

Sam burst into a terrific guffaw, and fairly shook with laughter, until the windows rattled.

"Why, thunderation, Nat, how long ye bin affected wi' that disease?"

"All mine life, sir. Who you vas und vat you want?"

"Phew! don't know me?"

"No, sir."

"Don't reckernise the æsthetic cut o' my mug?"

"Py tam, I never see you!"

"Git out! Why, I know you. As fer me, I am known as Sunflower Sam, the second Wilde Oscar. Had another name once. I'm an æsthetic!"

"Vot ish dot?"

"Well, it's half way betwixt a what-is-it, and a polar bar, wi' a little giraffe mixed in. Reckernise yer own fotygraff?"

"You ish von pig fool. Tell me vot you vont, and get right away oud, gwick, or I drow you down der steps."

The old Jew was evidently getting his ire aroused, but it apparently did not concern the æsthetic, for he chuckled, good-naturedly.

"Well, I'll tell you!" he said. "Ther primeval cause o' my wisit, Natty, dear, is for the unscrupulous purpose of gathering in some root-of-evil—otherwise swag—alias money. Presuming that you would know me, I ventured tew ruminate that yeou would be glad tew pan out, on the account of old scores."

"Old scores! Vot der Satans you means? You vas a lunatic. I neffer knows you in mine life, so help me."

"Waal, p'raps ye don't reckernise me. I uster live in Denver, an' was known by the name o' Pea-knuckle Pete, from the fact that I uster play the game often."

"Vell, vot of dot? I neffer heard off you. Vy should I pay you monish?"

"Simply because et will be to yer interest to do so. I hold an important secret of yours. It is the death-bed confession of a man yer once made yer tool!"

"You lie!" Blob cried, leaping to his feet. "You ish an imboster, who tries for to sheat me mit mine monish oud."

"Nary a time, sheeny! Shall I go on and tell ye a leetle story, all about—"

"Sdop! sdop!" the Jew gasped, turning pale. "Der vos no need of dot. Vot you vant to keep your mouth shut?"

"Spondulics, on course. Ye see, I'm studyin' æsthetic culture, wi' a view o' goin' on ther stage—me an' my dorg, Jurisprudence. So et needs shavin's to eddicate us. Then, too, thar's another party in the field, who's on the scent, an' would pay well fer what tongue I've got. Savy?"

"I understand vot you mean. Vil a t'ousand dollar do you?"

"Well, I reckon that might answer for about a month. Don't wanter be hard on yew at first, 'ca'se et's a poor bank as suspends at ther first run. So shell out."

Without a word, the Jew took a plethoric wad of bills from his pocket and counted out the desired sum.

"There you vas," he said. "Now I shall expect dot you vil keep your mouth shut."

"Closer than the jaws o' a steel-trap," the giant grinned, arising. "Guess I will go now, an' skirmish for my side pardner, Jurisprudence. Wuss'n a billy goat, that hoss. Eats tin cans, pick-axes, an' anything that's digestible, in the shape o' food."

Then, with another smile that even Oscar Wilde must have pronounced sublime, the giant took his departure.

Nathan Blob sat in his chair an instant afterward, a greenish glitter in his eyes.

"Dot man vas dangerous," he muttered. "If he vas found deadt, no one knows who kills him."

Seizing a piece of paper he hastily wrote several words upon it, and put it in his pocket; then, armed with a knife, he glided out.

It was now deep dusk, but a short distance away he distinguished a man's figure moving toward the business portion of the town.

Like a sleuth the Jew was at once in pursuit, the wind and the rush and roar of the creek wholly silencing his footsteps.

The nearer he approached his victim, the denser seemed to grow the night mist, so that even when he raised the murderous knife to strike the fatal blow, he could barely distinguish the form in front of him.

A quick uplifting of his arm, a dull thud; then, without a groan, the victim staggered and fell forward upon his face.

"There! dot settles you!" the Jew gritted, kneeling beside his victim. "Ouch! Oh, mine Got! I have made a pig mistake. As I lif, it ish Snap! Holy Moses! vot vil I do? I haff proken my own nose. Snap! Snap! Open your eyes, you fool, und dells me you vasn't hurt at all!"

But Snap was past all recall, and Nathan Blob was a murderer.

He knelt there for some minutes, nearly dumfounded by the terrible mistake he had made.

"It vas too bad," he muttered, at last. "I neffer haff no more chance to make money off from poor Snap. Oh! vell, such vas life. I must leaf him here und let him pe found. I vil fix dis paper on him, und fix der crime on dot Arizona sharp!"

From his pocket he took the paper he had indited at the office, and pinned it upon the breast of the dead man.

The message was:

"Revenge is sweet!"

"ARIZONA ALF, Joaquín's Avenger."

"Dot vil fix him so he flirt mit Christie no more!" the old wretch muttered, as he skurried away.

From off a rocky gulch there branched a deep, dark ravine, barely wide enough to admit of the passage of two horses abreast. The walls arose perpendicularly to a great height, and from this fissure poured a noisy brook.

Probably not one hunter or prospector in a score would have thought of wading up the stream into this forbidding ravine; yet had they done so they would, eventually, have debouched into a little mountain-locked pocket, the bottom of which covered about an acre's area.

Here were a number of skin lodges of commodious size and aboriginal decoration.

It had evidently, some time in the past, been an Indian encampment, but was now the rendezvous of Denver Doll and her road agents, and a retreat better adapted to their life could hardly have been found.

There were both grass and water for their

horses, and game in the outer gulch was plentiful.

The mouth of the ravine, where it opened into the pocket, was kept constantly guarded by two of the band, so that a surprise was out of the question.

The largest of the lodges was built on a raised platform of logs, with awnings around it, making it a pleasant place to sit on a sunny day.

The evening being damp, however, Denver Doll was inside her commodious lodge, seated by a rude table, when her lieutenant, George, made his appearance.

"Excuse me, captain, but there are two parties halted in the ravine, who seek entrance to the pocket. I await your orders."

"Who are they, lieutenant?"

"One of them is the dashing sport, Arizona Alf. The other is a woman."

"Well and good. Bring them here."

Fifteen minutes later Arizona and Miss Christie entered the road-agent queen's lodge.

"Excuse me, lady," the sport said; "this is Miss Christie, a friend of mine. I found her laboring under the persecutions inflicted by a tyrannical father, and ventured, on the strength of our acquaintance, to bring her here for a few days' protection."

"You were quite right, Arizona. Whenever in need, you know you are welcome to my camp. Miss Christie, I am glad to have you come. It won't seem quite so lonely to have another woman in camp. Mr. Arizona, here, is one of my best friends and any of his acquaintances are welcome to my hospitality, I'm sure."

"Any of my friends, you mean," Arizona laughed. "Some of my acquaintances might not be worthy of a welcome here. I will leave Miss Christie in your care now, and drop around again to-morrow night perhaps. A word in private, if you please, fair captain," and he led the way to the log veranda, where Denver Doll followed him.

Christie's eyes were afire in an instant, and her cheeks burning with jealousy, she stole to the door, pulled aside the curtain slightly, and watched them, as they stood conversing in subdued tones.

What they said she could not hear, but when Arizona Alf turned to depart, he raised his hat gracefully to the fair road-queen—which Christie remembered, with a jealous pang, he had not done to her. Perhaps he had forgotten it, but he had not forgotten to be extra polite to the girl outlaw.

"I don't believe I love him, after all," she mused angrily, "and I don't believe I shall stay here at all. I don't like this Denver Doll—I don't like her. She is too bewitching. Two thousand dollars? That's more money than papa ever gave me at once, and more than that mean, snob Snap would give me. No, indeed! I won't forget Mr. La Force's offer."

Denver Doll soon re-entered the lodge, and endeavored to entertain her guest, but found it a difficult job, as Miss Christie was both cynical and contrary, and inclined to hold herself aloof; so, after several vain attempts, Doll showed her to another compartment of the lodge, and bade her good-night.

"If she is Arizona's choice," she mused, "I'll bet there'll be hair-pulling after the honeymoon. She is a snake-in-the-grass, or I'm mistaken. But, however that may be, it's none of my business!"

And with this conclusion, she lay down for the night.

CHAPTER XI.

ARIZONA'S ENTRANCE AND EXIT.

ARIZONA ALF went back to Freshet Flats, and to his room, at the hotel, where he passed the remainder of the night in slumber.

Early in the morning, however, he heard loud cries outside, and looking out of the window saw a large crowd collected in front of the tavern, all of whom appeared much excited.

"I wonder what's the wrinkle?" he muttered, hastily dressing himself. "Can Denver Doll have been paying another visit?"

As soon as dressed, he looked to his revolvers, and left the room; but as he stepped into the hall, he was suddenly pounced upon by a couple of powerful men, and tripped to the floor, where he was bound, hand and foot, in spite of his struggles.

He was then dragged down the stairs, and out upon the veranda, in front of the hotel, where he was planted upon his feet.

Then, for the first, he saw the lifeless form of Apollo Snap, which had been found and laid upon the veranda.

The paper was still pinned upon his breast, and as his eyes fell upon it, Arizona Alf understood why he was arrested, and his face flushed with indignation.

"D'ye see that?" Jean La Force cried, approaching him, and leering evilly into his face. "Ye see that, don't ye? Yer cussed neck's goin' to pay fer that job, or I hain't got no say about the matter."

"I understand the paper intimates that I committed that murder!" Arizona cried, "but I swear I did not do the job, nor do I know who did. Some enemy has evidently taken this method of getting revenged upon me."

"Perhaps I did it!" the gambler sneered, savagely.

"I shouldn't wonder!" was the fearless retort. "You are none too good to commit any crime."

"Well, you'll find out. Weren't in camp, last night, I suppose. Nevertheless, you got back time enough to commit his crime. I know where you went, also. Did you find the fair Denver Doll well?"

Arizona's lips compressed, and a steely glitter entered his eyes, but he did not answer.

"Gents!" La Force went on, "there is no need of having any trial in this case, as it is as plain as the nose on your face that this feller is guilty of the murder, aside from the damning note o' braggadocio he left upon the corpse. I believe ye all know, full well, that Arizona an' Snap were declared enemies! I have instituted careful inquiries, an' can't find as Snap had an enemy in the world, aside from this chap. What evidence d'ye want more conclusive, that he murdered the harmless young Englisher? Then, thar's another pint; Last night, he eloped wi' Blob's gal, an' tuk her to the stronghold of Denver Doll. I overheard the plot, myself. Likely Snap interfered, an' thus got stuck!"

A murmur of approval ran through the crowd. It was evident that they fully believed in the guilt of Joaquin's Avenger.

Arizona Alf spoke not; indeed, he did not see any use of speaking. His face was a trifle pale, and his features were set hard, and stern. He was aware that a terrible trap had sprung on him, and there was very little hope for his escape from it.

"You see, feller-citizens!" La Force went on, "I don't say all this out o' personal spite, for I really feel sorry for the poor cuss; but I am your mayor, an' et's my bizness to speak fer you, the people. It's a clear case, an' I opine we can't do no better than put the border code inter effect. His neck ain't better'n hundreds o' others as has received the noose, an' I motion we put the matter through, in becomin' shape!"

"No! no! sdog! I brodest apoud dot! Don't you vas hang him, ondl he dells me where I finds my daughter!" exclaimed Nathan Blob.

Arizona smiled mockingly, for the first time.

"You want her back, eh?" he questioned.

"Dunder, yesh! Off I lose mine Christie, I go crazy mit der lunatic asylum. I—I—I—"

And the ponderous Jew paused, for want of power of utterance.

"Well, let me tell you!" Arizona answered. "When the noose shirs around my gullet, your daughter will be a corpse. That's all!"

"Stop! stop! don't hang him!" Blob yelled, frantically, as he danced up and down, frightened out of his wits. "I pay you monish not tu hang him, until I vas get mine Christie back."

"I propose," suggested a newly arrived, well-dressed, and fine-looking gentleman, "that we don't hang this man, simply on *circumstantial* evidence; but, on the other hand, that we gave him a chance for his life by turning state's-evidence, and delivering up this pack of road-agents. How does it strike you, gents?"

A loud murmur of approval went up from the crowd.

"That's more like it!" a number cried.

"You bet!" chimed in others. "Give every dog a show!"

La Force looked disappointed.

"Wal, we'll hev to see about it," he growled. "I ain't in favor o' givin' a murderer no show at all. All in favor o' the motion suggested sing out!"

A shout pealed forth that was almost unanimous.

"S'pose we'll have to give him a chance, then," the gambler announced, with an oath.

"Arizona Alf, you've got till sunset to make up yer mind whether you'll accept the noose or lead an armed party to Denver Doll's retreat!"

The Avenger answered not. A faint smile hovered upon his lips; otherwise his features were immovable, and their expression was hard to interpret.

"The next thing is a good, strong room to store the cuss in!" La Force said.

"I haff got shust der ding!" Blob cried. "I fixed it up last night on burpose to shut up mine Christie in, so she don'd vould escape. Yust fetch der brisoner, und I dakes care off him, you pet!"

"Reckon you'll have to give bail for his safe-keeping, old gent," one miner interposed, and the sentiment was generally echoed.

"Vel, den, I gif der mayor a t'ousand dollar for security," Blob said. "Pring along der brisoner."

Arizona's feet were unloosened, and with a revolver pressed to either temple, he was forced to walk to the Blob residence, and into a room up-stairs, the windows of which had been barred like a prison.

Here his hands and feet were doubly bound, and the door was locked upon him.

Old Nathan, in his office, paid the thousand dollars to La Force, and the crowd departed.

Not long after, the Jew entered his house, locked the doors, and ascended to the room where Arizona was half reclining upon the floor.

"Vel, how you veel?" he chuckled. "Don'd like id, somedimes, eh?"

"Oh, it does very well," Arizona retorted.

"But you vas foolin' apoud mine schild, Christie."

"Nary a time. If I swing she swings."

"S'posin' she get free?"

"Impossible."

"Vel, den, you gif up the road-agents to der shustice."

"I hope to never breathe again if I do!"

"Vot! You hang first?"

"You bet."

Blob put up his hands in horror.

"You vas crazy!" he declared. "You don'd know vot you says."

"Queer, if I don't!" Arizona returned. "One thing is patent—it will be a cold day that I betray Denver Doll. The girl is doing *right*. She should have her own; and I don't blame her for raising thunder till she gets it. As for myself, I am innocent of the murder, and I'll die game before I'll make another the tool by which I purchase my liberty."

The speech seemed to have some little impression upon the Jew, for he was silent for several minutes.

"Den you vas like mine schild?" he finally asked.

"Yes."

"Und she likes you?"

"I flatter myself she does."

"Vel, she always vas a headstrong girl. I don'd know vot vil become mit her. Now, supposin' I vas to gif you your liberty—would you gif me pack my schild and neffer bodder us no more?"

"No, I would not. More, I would not accept my liberty at *your* hands."

"Den you vil die like von dog, und I vil run der risks of recoverin' my Christie."

"So be it!" was the calm response.

In a rage the Jew turned to leave the room, when, to his horror, he found himself confronted by no less a personage than Denver Doll, who held a pair of six-shooters leveled full upon him.

"Halt, Mister Israel!" she commanded. "If you stir, except when directed, or utter a peep, I'll put a bullet right through your big corporosity!"

"I beg! don'd shoot! I do yust vat you dells me—only don'd shoot!"

"Very well. Unbind that man!"

"Py shimminy! vot you mean? He escape den!"

"Exactly! Unbind him!"

"But, my dear young vimmins, off he escape I lose so mooch as a t'ousand dollars!"

"Do you hear me? Unbind him, I say!" the road-agent queen cried—so sharply that Blob jumped to do her bidding.

In a few seconds Arizona Alf was free of his bonds and stood erect.

"Now, then, Blobsy, dish over what cash you have about your person and we will leave you!" Doll ordered. "No hesitation, or—pop, and over you go!"

In despair, the Jew handed over his well-filled pocketbook, which Doll accepted in a very matter-of-fact way.

"Now the key to this room, please," she said.

"Vot! You ain't goin' to lock me cop!"

"Just that. Shell out!"

The ugly chambers of the revolvers glared so menacingly at the Jew that he obeyed.

In a moment more he was locked in his own prison room, while Doll and Arizona were en

route out of Freshet Flats, by the underground passage, the secret of which was known only to them.

This passage came out in a clump of bushes at the edge of the creek, and had probably at some previous period been a subterranean watercourse.

Once outside of it, the two adventurers had no difficulty in skulking out of sight of the town without discovery, where, in a little hidden bear's cave in the mountain-side, the handsome horse of the queen of the road was secreted.

"You have saved my life!" Arizona remarked. "How can I ever repay you?"

"No pay is needed. I count you as a man who would be willing to do me a favor, were I in need. Therefore, I do not care even to be thanked. Will you return to the retreat?"

"No; not if I can find a disguise in your half-way den here?"

"Yonder, beneath that boulder, are a number belonging to my men. I will wait here until dark. I have a new racket on foot."

Arizona was but a few minutes in disguising himself, after which he set out for the mining camp equipped as a prospector.

Just about sunset that night, no less a personage than Nathan Blob might have been seen tearing madly along toward the Satanello, with his hat off, and puffing and panting like a porpoise.

A crowd had collected by the time he reached the gambling-house, and stared at him in astonishment.

"What in thunder is the matter?" La Force demanded savagely. "Has the cuss escaped?"

"Yes, yes! Gif me my thousand dollar—gif me minet'ousand dollar! I can't afford to lose dot!" the Jew spluttered.

"I've a mind to give you a bullet through your cussed head!" the gambler vociferated. "How did he escape? Out with it!"

"Vy, dot vimmens, Denver Doll, she got in mit der house, und say, off I don'd vas set him free she put von bullet through me. I vas 'fraid she would, so I had to do it. Den dey robbed me und lock me mit der room in, und I just got out."

"This is a thunderin' note!" La Force shouted, as he started with a number of others to visit the Jew's house. There they found that the Jew had not lied.

Poor Blob!

The losses of cash he had sustained that day nearly broke his heart, and he mourned incessantly.

CHAPTER XII.

A BIG SCARE.

THAT night, as usual, the night gang of miners descended into Denver Doll's Drift, while the day gang were brought up, and wended their way homeward.

This Drift, like the general run of mines of its class, descended on a gradual slant from its mouth, and a rude car was made, together with accompanying track, for hauling the debris as well as the precious ore out of the bowels of the earth, the power being furnished by a string of burros.

The miners, therefore, used the car as a means of transportation in and out of the tunnel.

At the mouth of the Drift was a little office, from which the laborers received their pay.

Jean La Force sat in this office during the evening, engaged in smoking and chatting with his right-hand man, Ben Blye, when there came a rap at the door.

Opening it, he beheld to his astonishment, the night gang, who had gone in a couple of hours before, huddled together like a flock of sheep, and bearing every appearance of having experienced a severe fright.

"What the mischief is the matter? Why are you all out here?" the gambler demanded, angrily, it occurring to him that they might have organized a strike.

The miners exchanged glances; then one old gray-bearded veteran, named Uncle Eph Paine advanced, and said:

"You'll excuse us, boss, but we all allow we don't keer to work in the mines any longer—especially of nights!"

"Why not? What the thunder's got into you, pray?"

"Waal, ye see, we've most all seen sum purty hard scrapes, but we allow we don't keer about workin' whar thar's ghosts."

"Ghosts?"

"Yas, you bet! Leave it to the boys ef we didn't all see a reg'lar, bona-fide ghost, right in the mine, an' et pointed a skeleton finger et us,

rattled its bones, and perlutely invited us to skip! We skipped!"

La Force laughed.

"Why, you cussed idiots, you're crazy! There's no sech thing as ghosts!"

"There is!" Uncle Eph declared. "Ef ye don't b'lieve it, go an' see fer yerself. We'll all dare ye to go! Eh, boys!"

The "boys" gave a chorus of assent.

If there was one thing La Force prided himself on more than another, aside from card-playing, it was for bravery. No matter though he got whipped in a "scrimmage," he argued that it did not lessen his courage in the least, and many of his encounters went to show that this was the case.

To be dared by his own employees to enter a dark, forbidding, underground chamber, where they claimed to have seen a ghost, was something he had not expected, and for the moment he did not know hardly what to say or do.

To not accept the challenge would certainly show him up in a cowardly light, to his discredit, and would also have the effect to lessen the chances of getting the men to go back to work.

"Pshaw! I'd just like the fun of such a thing, to show you what a pack of idiots you are," he exclaimed, with a forced laugh. "Lnd me one of your lights, and I'll go down and see what lump of rock has so frightened you."

Uncle Eph chuckled as he handed over his own lamp.

"Bet you'll come back wi' yer ha'r standin' on end!" he remarked. "Shall we let ye down in the car, boss?"

"No! I'll walk down the incline and back. You fellows can consider yerselves docked fer time, while I'm gone."

Putting on a bold front, he entered the mouth of the drift and strode down the track, apparently as fearless as a lion.

In lively anticipation of the result, the miners gathered about the mouth of the mine and waited patiently.

His footsteps were soon inaudible, and the light died out, leaving blank darkness behind him.

Two—three—five minutes elapsed—then a sound, like the smothered report of a pistol, reached the hearing of the watchers. This was followed by several others.

"He's havin' a skirmish wi' the ghost!" Uncle Eph averred. "Wonder how he likes 'em?"

Two minutes later Jean La Force came running up the drift, puffing and panting like a frightened runaway horse.

His lantern and hat were gone, and his face was near as white as the immaculate bosom of his shirt.

He didn't speak until he reached the office, where he sunk down on the steps from sheer exhaustion.

"Waal, did ye see ther ghost?" queried Uncle Eph, with a malicious grin.

"See it?—of course I saw it, you fool. Why, cuss my boots, I hadn't hardly got into the accursed hole before I see'd it a-comin' for me. I drew my revolvers an' let drive, but the more I fired the faster it come fer me, until I was obliged to turn an' run. Boys, what the devil is it?"

"That's what we want know before we go on ag'in," one of the miners answered. "Tain't pleasant to have a spook fer a gang boss."

"Curse it, thar's no sech thing as ghosts, boys. It's some one fixed up—a plot of Denver Doll's, maybe, to get possession of the mine."

"You count yerself a good pistol-shot, don't ye, boss?"

"Of course!"

"Well, how d'ye account fer a human swallerin' six bullets?"

La Force looked grim.

"Cursed if I know," he returned. "Jest ye go home, but come back in the morning, and go to work. Not a word of this to the other gang. I'll give 'em night four-to-morrow night."

This was more than agreeable, for the men were eager to learn how the other gang would succeed with his ghostship.

So, for the remainder of that night, the vicinity of the mine was deserted.

If Jean La Force had depended on keeping the matter hushed up, he was greatly disappointed, for the following morning the town was alive with the report that Denver Doll's Drift was haunted by a genuine ghost, that had scared off even the boss himself.

Great excitement prevailed, and the street was alive with curious people, who discussed the probabilities and improbabilities of supernatural visitations.

The day gang flatly refused to go to work un-

til the matter was cleared up, and La Force's threats and entreaties had no effect.

"I'll give a hundred dollars to the five men who will go into the mine and solve the matter!" he cried. "My opinion is that a trick is being played on us!"

"Hyar's one as ain't skeart. I'm ready; pan out yer others!" roared Sunflower Sam. "Never see'd the ghost yet as could skeer me!"

And the giant aesthete appeared to mean just what he said.

Four more men soon volunteered after the aesthete gave the impetus.

"Fork over your lucre, now," Sam said, "and we're off. Cash before delivery, in this case."

Realizing the necessity of getting his men to work, La Force did not object, but promptly handed out the cash, and the five adventurers started into the mine.

The descent down the drift was made in quick order, and they found themselves in the chamber of the mine where the gangs had been at work. Although they had brought lanterns along, they had not lighted them, preferring to see if his ghostship would make himself manifest through the Stygian gloom.

They stood for some minutes, with their revolvers ready for use, but nothing of the spookish order appeared to their vision.

Then, at a word from Sunflower Sam, they shot the slides upon their lanterns, and the chamber was illuminated in every part.

"Nary a ghost here!" the aesthete declared. "Still, we will make a cuss search, an' see that thar ain't no hidin'-places."

A thorough search developed the fact that there was no place where a human ghost could hide, nor was there any sign of any supernatural being to be found.

The explorers therefore left the mine, and delivered their report. Consequently, the day gang went to work, and were not frightened out, as the night gang had been.

A guard was also stationed at the mouth of the mine to prevent the possibility of any human agency gaining access and playing the freak of the previous night.

CHAPTER XIII.

A REMARKABLE INTERRUPTION.

THAT day, as Arizona was lounging in his miner's disguise upon the veranda of the shanty hotel, he saw an old, age-frosted pilgrim hobbling along down the street, with the aid of a staff.

It was the same man whom Denver Doll had met in the gulch, who had called her his daughter.

The Arizonian's keen eyes glittered, as the old man came nearer, and his teeth went together with so distinct a click, that he turned to see if the sound had been noticed by a red-whiskered pilgrim who sat on the veranda, but a little ways off.

The pilgrim, however, evidently was absorbed in reading a newspaper.

"At last!" Arizona Alf muttered, in under his breath. "If I am not greatly in error, here is my last victim but one, in avenging poor Joaquin! Ah! how I have wiped them out, though, the dogs!"

The old man slowly drew near the hotel, his every movement denoting feebleness and fatigue.

The steps leading to the veranda of the hotel seemed to have an inviting aspect to him, for he paused, looked at them, and then hobbled toward them.

Arizona was by his side, in an instant, and caught him gently by the arm.

"Excuse me, pard," he said, "but you look worn out. Let me help you to a seat."

And he assisted old Reuben Morse to his own chair upon the veranda, and going into the bar, brought him out a glass of brandy.

"Thankee! thankee!" the old man murmured. "Mebbe that will help me to a little more strength, tho' I seldom use it."

After he had partaken of the stimulant, he did, in truth, seem to be somewhat revived, and when the Avenger came back and seated himself near by, he said:

"Well, I must thankee again, stranger. I'm getting to be an old man, an' I ortn't be joggin' around the country the way I am. S'pose this is Freshet Flats, eh?"

"Yes, this is Freshet Flats. Going further?"

"No. I think I'll tarry here, a few days. I kind o' think I'll meet an old friend, here, perhaps."

"Indeed? That will be good. What is the name?"

"Me! Oh! I'm Reuben Morse, formerly of

Denver, but now, from nowhere, in particular."

"Aha! but, I mean, your friend's name? I might be able to help you to find him."

"That's so. Much obliged, but ye see, I don't know exactly what he might be called, hyarabouts. He generally has a new name fer every place he goes. Last time I heard o' him, he called hisself Sunflower Sam."

"Ah! then he is here. He has a shanty and a claim down the gulch, but I believe he's off for a hunt, to-day, and won't be home till dark. If you like, since you're so old, I'll show you where he lives, to-night."

"You are very kind, sir. It is seldom I meet an acquaintance so friendly. I will accept of your offer; and in the mean time I think I'll hire a room, in the hotel, and rest until it is time to go."

"Certainly. I will secure one for you. Come with me."

And the Avenger led the way into the hotel, and had the best bedroom placed at the old wanderer's convenience.

"I can afford to do this!" he said. "My reward will come to-night, I know!"

Night came on, and about sunset, old Reuben Morse appeared upon the veranda, where Arizona once more sat smoking a cigar.

"Well, my good friend," the old man said, "I feel much rested, and am ready to go in search of my old friend."

"Don't be in a hurry," the Avenger responded. "Take a seat. Sunflower Sam, I dare say, won't be back until moon-up, and we'll start in good season to catch him at home. I suppose you are an old veteran, in mining. What do you think of our Lilliputian Eldorado, here?"

"Oh, it looks like a lively town, wi' promise o' growth!" was the answer. "But I tell ye, boy, California used to be the boss mineral State, and it is yet, for that matter."

"Ah! then you've roughed it there?"

"Ah! yes, for a number of years. Know the mining life pretty well, o'er thar."

"I suppose they used to have some pretty rough times over there?"

"Reckon as how they did, S'pose ye might o' heard o' that footpad, Joaquin Muriete. He war a tough customer, an' made himself a terror. But, I tell ye, we roped him in, at last, an' put an end to his sarcus."

"I have heard of his tragic fate," the Avenger said, averting his face to conceal its revengeful expression. "I presume there's few living who had a hand in entrapping him, and bringing him to his death?"

"Well, I reckon not. I guess I'm about the only one—though I didn't take no direct part. I've hearn tell that thar's some chap what is a-killin' off all who knew anything about the job, no matter whether they had any hand in it or not. He must be a cussed fool. Joaquin Muriete was a was a red-handed assassin, and no justice could give him his just deserts, I tell you!"

Arizona did not reply, but, to conceal his agitation, arose and entered the hotel.

There was a dark, malignant expression upon his face, and his eyes gleamed wildly. It was a remarkable change that came over him—a change, as it were, from the docility of a lamb to the rage of a lion.

He kept himself aloof from the wanderer, until it was quite dusky, and the moon bid fair to pop up from behind the horizon; then, he went out upon the veranda.

"Well, I guess we'll walk down to your friend's shanty, now," he remarked, "and see if he's returned from the hunt. Are you ready?"

"Yes, I'm ready, thankee!" was the reply.

They descended into the street, and Arizona led the way across the Flats, toward the rapid creek, which, now swollen by the recent rains in the mountains, roared loudly.

In due time they reached the big tree, where the Avenger had met Christie Blob. Here they paused, and Arizona faced his victim.

The tree was far enough from the camp that a loud cry would not be likely to attract attention.

"Why do you stop here?" Old Reuben asked, gazing at the swiftly rushing waters.

"For a purpose," was the stern reply. "Reuben Morse, do you know why I have brought you here?"

"No. Why?" the old man asked quickly.

"To fulfill a long made oath!" was the answer, as the Avenger drew his long keen knife. "I am going to kill you."

"Kill me? In Heaven's name, what have I done to you, man?"

"Nothing to me, direct, but, if you must know it, I am Joaquin's Avenger, and you are

the one of two that remain, before my vengeance is complete. I do not intend to strike you down like a dog, on account of your age, but give you a show for your life. You have a knife; draw it, face me and fight, and may God have mercy upon us both!"

"I am too old to fight; have mercy upon me. I never did any one a wrong—indeed, I did not."

"It matters not!" was the stern reply. "I swore to avenge Joaquin's death, and nothing can keep me from my purpose. You must fight, or I will strike you down!"

"Will you?"

It was not the old man who said this: it was Denver Doll who leaped forward through the gloom.

"The devil!" escaped Arizona's lips. "What brings you here?"

"To defend my old father, sir, against the attack of a vampire!" was the stinging retort. "I thought you a man, Arizona Alf, but you are a coward and a coyote! If there's any fighting to be done, allow me to inform you that I'll take a hand in it, myself!"

And her pair of gleaming revolvers indicated her purpose.

Arizona Alf did not answer for a moment, for he was too much surprised. He had had no idea of Reuben Morse being the father of Denver Doll, or of being in any way related to her.

And, too, the words uttered by the queen of road-agents stung him to the quick, for he realized that she was dead in earnest, and regarded him as a man of little more account than a typical ruffian of the mines.

"You probably do not understand this matter!" he finally said. "If this man is your father, he was concerned in the killing of Joaquin Muriete in California some years ago, and as I registered an oath to kill every individual who was concerned in Joaquin's death, you will naturally see that your father must be included in the list. I am sorry of this, for your sake, but I cannot break my vow for any person's sake."

"But, I rather opine you will care, if you attempt to harm a hair of his head. I have got the drop on you, and you know the style of a girl I am too well, I dare say, to tempt me to send a bullet through your brain. If you demand satisfaction, I ain't afraid to meet you, even though I am but a girl. You shall never touch my father."

"You are foolish!" the Avenger said. "I never could bring myself down to fight a woman, nor do I want to fight you. Your father, as you call him, is the meat I'm after, and have his life, I will, sooner or later! Let us adjourn this affair until some other time."

"Not much! It has got to be settled to-night. You have got to promise upon your hope of an after life, that you will never attempt to harm my father."

"I shall promise nothing of the kind."

"Then, sir, you and I shall settle this here and now!" Doll declared, with stern resolution in her fine face.

The moon had just appeared over the mountain crest, and shot a mellow ray of light over the girl's determined face.

"My child! my child! do not quarrel with this terrible man. Let him kill me, and have done with it!" Old Reuben cried in tremulous tones.

"Silence!" was the quick reply. "I am not afraid of him. I have not been a wandering outcast for nothing. What have you to say, Sir Avenger?"

"I believe it is unnecessary to say much!" the Arizonian replied, his tones cynical and cutting.

"You choose to represent your father, whom it is my purpose to slay. I cannot break my vow—consequently, you must take the consequences, or I."

"Exactly! What is your choice of weapons, may I ask?"

"The same that Joaquin generally used—Muriete, the knife. I can shoot, but prefer the blade!"

"Very well! It is immaterial to me. Now let us understand ourselves. If I do not kill you, is there any honorable gratitude in your heart?"

"None, whatever, so far as your father is concerned, let me assure you. You had better make sure of me, if you can, for, were I to be wounded and yet recover, my oath is unfulfilled. I shall endeavor to slay you first, and then your father. You can govern yourself accordingly."

"Then, it must be to the death. Are you ready?"

"I am!"

They drew their knives, and the moonlight glistened upon the blades.

Old Reuben Morse uttered a cry, and fell fainting to the ground.

Doll gazed at him, a moment, and then turned and faced the Avenger, her eyes glistening like diamonds.

"Ready!" she called out steadily.

They then crept toward each other, their hands holding the instrument of death in a firm clutch.

Eye to eye, face to face, they drew nearer to each other, then, when nearly within arm's-length, began to move around, on guard, watching each other with lynx-like intensity, and studying for an opportunity to leap forward and strike a telling blow, without incurring one in return.

A spectator, familiar with this peculiar style of dueling, would have been filled with admiration at the novel and skillful moves they made.

"All's fair?" Doll said, interrogatively.

"All's fair, to the death!" was the reply.

The next instant the blade Denver Doll had held, was buried to the hilt in the left side of the Avenger, after being hurled with awful celerity, by her deft hand.

Arizona endeavored to leap forward at her, but could not. He staggered, then fell to the ground, with a faint groan.

Doll sprung forward and pulled the knife from the wound, at which he put up his hands, imploringly.

"Mercy! don't!" he gasped.

"Never fear; I am not that cruel," she replied, a trifle bitterly. "You will not die. I simply aimed with the intent to lay you out. By the time you will have recovered, my father and I will be far from here, I trust."

"Will you? Well, perhaps you may be!" a hoarse voice exclaimed, in her ear, and turning she beheld Jean La Force but a few steps away, holding a pair of revolvers leveled at her. "Ha! ha! my beauteous road-agent, I happen to have the drop on you, now!"

"And, old chestnuts, I've got a couple o' pops p'intin' straight at your area!" another voice cried, and out from behind the tree scooted Little Bill, a gleaming pair of self-cockers in his grasp!

La Force gave a startled glance around, and instantly comprehended that he was in bad company, and there was little show for him; so he dropped his weapons, and ran like a deer toward the camp.

"Don't fire, Bill!" Doll cried. "There'll be an alarm quick enough!"

"Oh! jest let me plug him in the spine, fer luck, Dollbaby!"

"No! I say!" she warned. "See that these men are both properly cared for, because I must get out of this quickly. Did you get the machinery?"

"Yas. It's on the road."

"Good. We'll be ready for it, when it comes, I fancy. I'm off, now."

And before more could be said, she was speeding away, up the bank of the stream.

She was not wrong.

While Bill was dashing some water into the faces of the two men—for Arizona had also fainted—Jean La Force came running up, with half a dozen others.

"Where's the gal?" he roared.

"Dunno!" Bill replied, dauntlessly. "She told me to take care o' these fellers, an' then skipped."

"Which direction, you cussed little imp o' Satan?"

"Down-stream!" Bill lied, with a placidity that was unpardonable.

"Darn ye, you're the cause o' her escape!" the gambler yelled, and he gave the boy a terrible blow beside the head, that sent him spinning to the ground, deprived of his senses.

"Now, boys, some o' you take the two chaps back to camp, an' the rest o' us will give chase."

"Better let 'em lay here, an' the hull o' us join in," one of the gang suggested.

"Then come along."

They rushed away down the stream like a pack of hounds on the scent of game.

They were hardly out of hearing when Arizona Alf recovered from his faint, and raising upon his elbow, took in his surroundings.

"I'm not wounded to the death, it seems," he muttered. "If I can walk, I must get away from here. There's old Morse lying there like a log, but I'll not kill him now because the girl was merciful to me. Hello! the kid is here too! The roughs must have been here, and gone in pursuit of Denver Doll. I must get away before

they return, or it will be all up with me, I allow."

He found, upon experimenting, that he could stand upon his feet, although he felt weak from the loss of blood, the flow of which had in a measure subsided, which convinced him that his wound was not exactly dangerous.

After arising and gaining his equilibrium fully, he found himself able to walk slowly, and thus managed to get away from the vicinity of the old tree, where he had nearly received the fate he came there to accomplish for another.

Shortly after his departure, Little Bill recovered, and scooted away toward the camp.

"Reckon I'm in luck that they didn't chuck me into the creek!" he muttered. "Guess I better lie low till La Force muzzles his temper."

He had hardly gone, when Reuben awakened from his faint and gazed wonderingly around him.

"Can it have been a horrid dream?" he asked. "No! yonder are the lights of the camp. Oh! where are they? What has become of my child? Can the Avenger have murdered her, and cast her in the stream? No! something tells me she has escaped. I will go back to the camp, and if she is not there, I shall be satisfied that she is safe."

And he, too, hobbled away from the vicinity of the tree.

When La Force and his gang came back from their fruitless search, accordingly, they found no one.

"Cuss me ef the gal hasn't got more lives than a cat!" the gambler exclaimed. "But never mind! I'll trap her yet!"

And the unsuccessful party went back to the *Satanello* to liquor up, at the expense of the owner of the Drift, and spend the balance of the night at cards.

CHAPTER XIV.

A ROGUE'S END.

As Uncle Reuben did not find Arizona Alf, he felt assured of Doll's safety, and put up at the hotel for the night.

On the following morning he went forth upon the street, and almost the first man he met was Sunflower Sam, and the two shook hands familiarly.

"You see I came, an' hev been waitin' fer ye. Writ ye at Mottsville, but got no ans'er," the giant explained.

"'Ca'se I started soon arter you. Lost my horse back a piece, and had to hoof it. Any news?"

Samuel winked.

"Call me a cross-eyed Oscar, ef thar ain't!" he affirmed, softly. "As I told ye, ther game arriv'. It's heer, an' all that remains is to corral it, extort a confession, an' then bag it. D'ye savy?"

Morse nodded.

"I see, I see. You are sure?"

"As a sermon. See that roost?" and he indicated the Blob residence.

"Yes."

"Well, it's there. Housed, now, I dare say. Have you made up your mind to extort the confession?"

"Yes."

"If he refuses?"

"I'll kill him by inches!"

The old man spoke with a vim that was indisputable.

"I have suffered enough through that man," he went on, "and I mean to put the matter to the test, since, through you, I have learned the truth."

"Have you seen your child?"

"I met her in the mountains, and again last night."

"Then you know that she is an outlaw?"

"Great Heaven! no!"

Sunflower Sam went on and explained the case as well as he knew how.

"My poor child," Reuben Morse groaned, when he was done. "I am the innocent cause of all this. But there may be a brighter lining yet to liven up these clouds. What would you advise?"

"That you visit Blob at once, and come down to business. About the time I think all's ready, I'll drop in and arrest him."

They talked for a while longer, and then the aesthete made his way toward the hotel, while Reuben Morse sought the office of the Jew.

Blob was in, engaged in counting some money, and looked up in surprise at the bareheaded old man, whom it was plain he did not recognize.

"Vel, vot you vant?" he demanded, as Reuben helped himself to a seat. "I haff no monish to gif to beggars to-day."

"No one has asked you for alms, Nathan Blob," was the stern answer, as the old man pulled a pair of revolvers from his boot-legs and cocked them. "We've business more important to transact. Do you recognize me?"

"I tink I do!" was the reply. "You are Reuben Morse, don't it?"

"I am Reuben Morse. Do you remember, a number of months ago—nearly two years now—an event that happened?"

"Oh, yesh—I understant now. Your girl, she go to get married, und some von shoots her husband!"

"Exactly. Do you remember what followed?"

"Shimminy, yes! Your daughter she accuse you off doin' der business, und clear oud. Dot vas bad."

"Yes; a happy home was broken up, and father and child went adrift on the world. Do you know who committed the murder?"

"No; I know noddinks about dot."

"Well, you see, this man who was killed was adored by another, and he had once been betrothed to her. The girl was a Jewish maiden, and when Walraven's engagement to my daughter became known, the Jewish family were furious, and swore he should regret the disgrace his change of choice had reflected upon the Jew's daughter. The girl's father, therefore, with his plenty of gold, hired a worthless vagabond to assassinate Walraven at the altar. You, Nathan Blob, are the man who hired the deed done!"

The Jew uttered a curse, and seemed inclined to rush upon his accuser, but Morse's weapons held him in check.

"Stand, or I'll put a bullet through you. This tool died, and left a confession later of what otherwise might have been a life mystery!"

"You lie! you lie!—id vas all a lie!"

"No, it is not! The man who received the secret is in this camp—a detective at that! I do not propose to let you escape. Sit down to that table. Fail to obey me, and I will put a bullet through you as sure as I am a desperate man!"

Nathan Blob knew better than to disobey, so he sat down at the table again, where he had been seated on Morse's entrance.

"Vot you want?" he snarled. "If you don't put away dot pistols, I haff you arrested for carrying concealed weapons!"

Morse laughed.

"I have no fear of what you'll do," he replied, "and I guess you are pretty fully aware that these beauties are not concealed."

"Vot you want?" the Jew roared. "I haff no time to fool mit you. You vas a grazy lunatic, und I don't vant you here."

"I dare say not. You'll find out how crazy I am. Get a piece of paper, and write out a confession."

"A vot?"

"A confession. Mind, no trifling! I need but little provocation to shoot you. Write out the confession, stating that Reuben Morse is innocent of any conspiracy or attempt to murder one Walter Walraven, and that the murder was committed by you, through an accomplice, for sake of revenge."

"You dinks I gif mineself away like dot?" the Jew howled. "Vel, I guess you must dink I vas a fool!"

"So you are, to think I will tolerate any more trifling. One! two—"

"Stop! stop! I do yoost vot you say, oof you don't shoot."

"Then go ahead!"

Seizing a pen, the Israelite began writing slowly, and at the end of twenty minutes handed the confession to Reuben Morse.

It was penned in a scrawling hand, and read as follows, in very crude English as to orthography, but explicit enough in meaning:

"FRESHET FLATS, Sept. —.

"This shall certify that I, the subscriber, wish to vindicate one Reuben Morse from all blame about the death of one Walter Walraven, because he didn't do the deed. It was done by another man, who was hired by me. I got my revenge on that son-of-a-gun, bet your life."

NATHAN BLOB."

"That will answer," Morse assented. "It will heal the breach between my daughter and myself, and perhaps there may be some happiness yet for our lives. I will bid you good-day!"

At this juncture the door opened, and Sunflower Sam entered, jingling a pair of handcuffs in his grasp.

"Nattie, old boy, you're my meat!" he said, with an awful smile. "Sorry to have to act

against so generous a friend, but you see the fact is, I'm an officer of the law—me an' my dorg, Jurisprudence—an' it becomes my duty to inform you that I have a warrant for your arrest for being party to a murder!"

"Ish dot so? Vel, youst tell mine Christie I leave all to her, if I die!" And with a sudden and unexpected movement, he sprung over the table and out of the door.

Up the gulch he ran with wonderful speed for a man of his avoirdupois, and behind him sped the giant.

"Stop, durn ye, in the name of the law!" Sam thundered, "or I'll put a bullet through you quicker'n a cat can say catechism!"

But Blob paused not. He was making a life run of it; but it was to his sorrow.

Sam stopped for a moment and his pistol gleamed in the sunlight—then there was a sharp report, and the Jew dropped like a log, never to rise again.

The detective's unerring shot had done the work for the old rogue.

The tragedy created considerable excitement for an hour or so, but when Sunflower Sam explained, and showed the badge of his profession, Blob's death was regarded as little more than an everyday occurrence, and his big body was "planted" by the side of that of his own victim, Apollo Snap.

CHAPTER XV.

LITTLE BILL'S BIG LOSS.

SINCE the escape of Denver Doll Little Bill had kept himself pretty closely in hiding, for he knew that, should he expose himself, he would be seized for abetting the girl road-agent's escape.

To-day, however, he ventured forth upon the street, and almost the first man he encountered was Jean La Force, who was unusually savage, over dissipation and gambling losses the previous night.

"Oho! so I've got you, you young rascal, have I?" he cried, clutching the urchin by the shoulder. "You're the very rooster I want. D'ye know what I'm goin' to do?"

And he changed his hold and caught Bill by one of his rather large ears.

"Ouch! Let up, now!" the boy yelled. "Ef you don't I'll be your last sickness."

At a wink from La Force one of his cronies came up and seized Bill's hands from behind.

"See here! that ain't no fair!" the boy protested. "You fellers ain't afeard of a little chap like me, I hope?"

"Course not; but thar's nothin' like makin' sure of an eel afore ye skin him!" the gambler assumed, as he drew his knife and felt of its edge.

"Now, younker, I'll tell you jest what's what. You tell me where the gal, Denver Doll, has got her stronghold, or off comes one o' yer ears!"

Little Bill shuddered. He doubted not that the brute would do as he had threatened, for there was certainly evil enough in his depraved heart to commit any crime.

"I don't know, sir. She don't let me know where she hangs out. That's honest Injun!"

"Git out! Tell me, I say."

"I don't know!"

"D'ye hear? No hangin' back. Spill out, or off comes yer souse!"

"I've told ye I didn't know. You'd better not hurt me, Jean La Force."

"And why not?"

"Because you'll get paid back, two ter one!"

The gambler uttered a hoarse, evil laugh, that betrayed all the ruffian instincts of his nature.

"Then ye won't tell where Denver Doll can be found?" he repeated.

"No!" Bill replied, with heroic pluck. "Harg you, I wouldn't if I knew!"

The next instant there was a shrill scream of pain, and the boy darted toward the hotel, while La Force stood holding the severed ear.

Blood flowed freely from Little Bill's head, and he fell in a faint upon the hotel steps.

He was picked up and carried in, and an excited crowd gathered, while a doctor tenderly bandaged up the cut.

"Who did this devilish deed?" went from mouth to mouth, even among La Force's own pals.

"Jean La Force did," Little Bill cried, opening his eyes suddenly. "Give me a drink o' whisky, so I can get strength to kill him."

Stimulant was administered and he soon felt his strength return.

No effort was made to apprehend La Force—indeed, few in Freshet Flats would have dared tackle him.

And he seemed sullenly guilty over his brutal crime, for he skulked about, here and there, and

drank heavily, so that by noon he was fairly stupefied with liquor, and staggered away toward his usual napping place under the shade of the tree, by the creek, where he lay down and was soon oblivious of everything.

Little Bill did not remain quiet long, but was soon out on the street again, his mind fully made up to have revenge.

It did not take him long to learn the whereabouts of his enemy, and he crept over to the tree, only to perceive that the gambler was lying there, in the shade, sleeping off the effects of the liquor he had drunk.

Going back to the camp, the youthful avenger procured a lasso and some cords, after which he returned to the tree.

Setting to work with the caution of a fox, he succeeded in binding the gambler's hands and feet, without arousing him.

He next got the noose of the lasso about his neck, under the chin, and threw the other end up over a limb of the handy tree.

Seizing hold of it, he braced himself against the tree, and pulling with all his might, succeeded in raising La Force to an upright posture.

The strain of the rope about his gullet pretty effectually sobered that person, and he glared at his tormentor, ferociously.

"Curse you!" he gasped.

"Same to you!" Bill retorted, with a diabolical grin, which was a mixture of pain and satisfaction. "How d'ye like yer change o' base, Jeany? Cut off my ears will ye, you miserable skunk, thief and murderer? Bet you won't never cut off another one's ears. I'm jest goin' to make you hump. I'm goin' to pull ye up on yer tip-toes, an' let ye see ef ye can stan' on yer toes like a ballet gal," and he suited action to the word, by pulling the gambler up, so that only just the tips of his toes touched the ground.

A more painful position could hardly have been chosen, for it was a direct muscular strain, and unless he maintained his balance, the noose about his throat would tighten, and strangle him.

As soon as he had got the lariat fastened, Little Bill stood off and squinted at his victim, speculatively.

"Thar! I reckon you'll do, fer the present. Ef ye git tired, ye might try standin' first on one foot, and then on t'other. I'm goin' over to the howtel, now, to lay down. Ef ye want me, afore I come back, jest whistle. Dal dal cuckoo! tra! la! le!"

And with a provoking laugh, the young avenger strutted away, apparently forgetting his own injuries in his triumph over his enemy.

As La Force could not make himself heard, Bill went to the hotel, and lay down for awhile, with the intention of returning later; but that was made unnecessary. La Force had not been long in his torturing dilemma, when a woman came down the bank of the stream, and released him, by cutting his bonds, and the lasso.

She was none other than Christine Blob, the Jew's daughter, but she was a sorry-looking object. Her face was haggard and scratched, and her clothing torn and soiled. She looked as if she had had a week's tramp through the mountains.

"Thank thunder you came!" La Force growled. "I should 'a' given out, soon. So you're back, eh?"

"Yes."

"To betray the gang?"

"When I see the cash. I've been lost for over twenty-four hours. But I'm ready, when the money is."

They conversed for a while—then went into the camp.

La Force told her of her father's fate, but she seemed very little concerned about the matter.

A keen judge of human character, it did not take long for La Force to arrive at the conclusion that she was losing her reason.

The gang who were off to-day were men whom the gambler most counted on as his faithful followers, and he therefore hurriedly armed and equipped them for the raid upon Denver Doll's stronghold, knowing that he could depend upon them to fight for his interests.

He paid over to Christie the sum of two thousand dollars, which she accepted in good faith, little suspecting that it was counterfeit.

Then, well mounted, the party rode out of the camp, doubting not that they would come back victorious.

On they rode until, right ahead of them, a stern voice cried:

"Halt! Live men advance no further!"

"Charge!" La Force yelled, setting his spurs into his horse and dashing forward.

One rifle cracked, and the gambler bent for-

ward in his saddle, with the wailing cry of "Charge!"

The one shot was all that was fired, no further opposition being raised.

The invaders reached the pocket only to make an unexpected discovery.

Jean La Force lay forward upon his horse's neck—dead.

He had been shot through the temple by the unseen guard.

Nor was this all the discovery.

A charge down into the camp developed the fact that there was no one to charge upon.

The lodges were empty, and the road-agents were gone!

Taking their dead leader with them, the unsuccessful party turned back for Freshet Flats, bitterly cursing Christine for leading them on a wild-goose chase.

But the now half-demented girl scarcely noticed it; her gaze wandered constantly about her, as if in search of some one.

It was Arizona Alf she was looking for!

CHAPTER XVI.

THE DRIFT OWNS ITS QUEEN AGAIN.

THAT morning the day-gang had gone to their work in the mine as usual.

As soon as they reached the chamber a torch was ignited, and then each miner's lamp was lighted thereby.

They were all thus busied in procuring their lights when they heard an ominous click! click! as of the cocking of weapons, and gazing around them in surprise, it needed but one glance to satisfy them that they were prisoners.

A score and a half of armed men surrounded them, and held them covered at the muzzles of as many repeating rifles.

They were all masked except one, that one being the dauntless Denver Doll, who stood with a triumphant smile, watching the astonishment of the miners.

"Gentlemen," she said, "you are my prisoners. Make an attempt to escape, and my men will riddle you with bullets. Come forward, one by one, and lay your weapons at my feet."

She spoke pleasantly, yet sternly.

The men exchanged glances; then Doll's former superintendent said:

"We might as well come to Limerick at first as last, fellers. There's no disputin' powder an' lead, when they've got the drop. Here goes my barkers." And he threw down his weapons.

The other miners followed his example.

"You are a sensible set," Doll decided, looking them over, "and I see you are nearly all my old employees. I am glad of that because, henceforth, I am going to boss this mine, and Jean La Force's power in Freshet Flats is at an end. D'ye see these men?"

"Yas!" Banker answered, acting as spokesman for the others.

"Well, they are all honest, hard-working miners from the upper country, who are goin' to stand by me and help me get back my rights. We've got the mine, and are going to keep it; I allow you won't hinder us. Then there will be no opposition from any one but La Force, and what few roughs he can collect. And if they get the mine away from us, they're welcome to it."

"What do you propose to do with us?" Banker asked.

"That rests with yourselves to decide. If you swear allegiance to me, you will still continue to work here, under pay from me. If you refuse to back me, something else will have to be done."

"Well, for my part, I'd rather work for you than for Jean La Force!" Banker declared. "The others can do as they please."

The miners held a low consultation among themselves which lasted for several minutes—then, one of them said:

"I allow, miss, that we're all the same way o' thinkin' as Banker, an' we'll stick by ye as long as ye try to hold the mine. Some o' the boys—the new 'uns—lost money through you, though."

"Everything shall be made right—every dollar returned as I promised in my proclamation; and, too, your wages increased. You can go to work, now, while I go up into camp, and see how the land lays."

After carefully disguising herself, so that she closely resembled one of the miners, she ascended the incline, passed the guards, who had previously been brought over to her side, and entered the town.

Here she lounged about during the better part of the day, and had the satisfaction of seeing

La Force and his pals start off for her deserted mountain stronghold.

"Now then, is my chance!" she said; "when La Force returns, he'll be surprised."

She hurried back to the mine, and half an hour later had marshaled her fifty armed men out upon the Flats at the mouth of the mine, where they began cheering lustily.

"Hurrah! hurrah for Denver Doll! Long may she live!" was the cry that went up, and it had the effect to startle what citizens remained in the camp.

They collected in a huddle near the Satanello, but did not offer to approach the mouth of the Drift, probably fearing that they would be fired upon.

Accordingly, Doll gave Joe Banker instructions, and he went forward, carrying a flag of truce.

Several of the business-men advanced a few steps to meet him.

"Well, what's to pay now?" one of them asked.

"The price of order brought out of chaos," Banker replied. "Denver Doll and her men surprised us in the mine, and has recaptured it. She declares her intention of holding her rights, no matter what objections any one may have, and we, her former employees, believe it right that she shall have back the mine, and therefore have volunteered to support her cause. She desires to know in what light she is to consider the citizens—as enemies or as friends. If they accept of her as a citizen, as before, all well and good. If not, she will defend her mine to the bitter end."

"On the part of what citizens are in camp just now, I am of the opinion that I can bespeak for her a welcome, if she has ceased her unlawful raids. What she can expect from La Force and his gang, she must be the judge. If you will wait, I will secure the sentiment of the crowd," said Jim Fisk, the grocery-man. He came back a few moments later and announced:

"The majority is in favor of receiving her back, but there's some balky ones and possibly will be more. Ben Blye, La Force's partner, is offering a hundred dollars per man who will stand up for the gambler, and it's likely to have some effect. When La Force returns there will be an attack, and then, if you are ready, the matter can soon be settled as to who will hold the mine, and who won't."

Banker returned to the mine and informed the girl chief of the result of his parley.

"It's all right!" she said. "You see that the boys are ready to fight at an instant's notice."

During the remainder of the afternoon, several reinforcements came in from the camp, among whom were Reuben Morse, Sunflower Sam, and Little Bill.

The matter of the mystery concerning Walter Walraven's murder was then cleared up to Doll's entire satisfaction, and she welcomed her aged father with a great warmth of affection.

"Lookie, hyer, Dollbaby!" Little Bill interposed. "Don't be too kerkfectionate on the old gent, or ye won't hev any left fer my daddy duke, over the briny puddle."

"You keep still, or I'll cut your other ear off!" Doll warned, laughingly.

By early moonlight, the party whom La Force had led so valiantly from the camp, returned, bearing their dead leader.

"Now look out fer it!" Doll cried. "Some one's a gone case, an' I reckon it's La Force."

Half an hour later a messenger was sent out from camp, with the news that no attack would be made.

Blye could not prevail upon his pals to run the risk of their lives.

Little more remains to be told.

The death of La Force and restoration of Denver Doll, literally put an end to ruffianism at Freshet Flats and it became a peaceable town as long as Doll remained there. According to her proclamation every man who had been robbed was repaid to his entire satisfaction and there was no stigma attaching to the Red Stars who had helped Denver Doll regain her property and her good name.

Arizona Alf, and Christie, were found, in the mountains, lying side by side—dead!

The latter had evidently killed the Avenger, and then killed herself.

Reuben Morse died, soon after being restored to his child; and now, rich in purse and strong in purpose, she arranged to leave her mine under the management of Sunflower Sam and Banker, while she set out in pursuit of her too long deserted calling of detective, and in fresh scenes of adventure we may renew her acquaintance, anon.

THE END.

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